

# **REPRESENTATIONS OF SLAVE SUBJECTIVITY IN POST-APARTHEID FICTION: THE ‘SIDEWAYS GLANCE’**

by  
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## **DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own original work and has not previously in its entirety or in part been submitted at any university for a degree.

Signature:

Date: 7 February 2013

## ABSTRACT

Over the past three decades in South Africa, the documentation of slave history at the Cape Colony by historians has burgeoned. Congruently, interest in the history of slavery has increased in South African letters and culture. Here, literature is often employed in order to imaginatively represent the subjective view-point and experiences of slaves, as official records contained in historiography and the archive often exclude such interiority. This thesis is a study of the representations of slave subjectivity in two novels: Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book* (1998) and *Unconfessed* (2007) by Yvette Christiansë. Its task is to investigate and traverse the multitude of readings made possible in these literary representations, and then to challenge such readings by juxtaposing the representational strategies of the two novels.

Both primary texts are works of historical fiction that, in different ways, draw on the archive and historiography in order to grant historical plausibility to their narratives. Engaging with the distinct methods with which they approach and interpret such historical information, I adopt the terms “glimpsing” and “reading sideways”. Throughout this study, I engage each of these methods in order to demonstrate the value, and limits, of each technique in its engagement with the complexities of representing slave subjectivity in the wake of its (predominant) occlusion from historical and official data.

Chapter One presents a brief overview of the emergence of the slave past in historiography and public spaces. Following Pumla Gqola's statement that “slave memory [has] increase[d] in visibility in post-apartheid South Africa”, I move to a discussion of the theoretical perspectives on (re)memory as employed by writers of fiction that exemplify “a higher, more fraught level of activity to the past than simply identifying and recording it” (“Slaves” 8). In turn, I identify the imperative archival silence places on authors to write about slaves, and the relevance of genre in this undertaking. Specifically, I consider the romantic and tragic historical fiction genres as they are utilised by Jacobs and Christiansë in approaching representations of slave subjectivity, and how this influences emplotment. Chapter One concludes with a brief exposition of the literary representations offered by *Unconfessed* and *The Slave Book*.

Chapter Two presents a detailed study of Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book* as a novel of historical fiction. Jacobs takes up a methodology of “glimpsing” at the slave past through the representations available in historiography. I trace the moments at which the text seeks to convey slave subjectivity, within and without historical discourses, through such “glimpses”,

and show how they are employed to establish a focus on interiority and to humanise slave characters.

Chapter Three focuses on Yvette Christiansë's *Unconfessed* and explores its explicit engagement with silences surrounding the protagonist Sila van den Kaap's historical presence in the Cape Town Archives. I read Christiansë's representation of these silences as "acts of looking sideways" at the discursive practices inherent in the historical documentation of slave voices that enact her resistance to "filling" these silences with detailed narrative. I argue that the various forms of silence in the narrative allow for a deeper understanding of the injustices and oppression suffered by Sila van den Kaap, and that it is these silences, ironically, which grant her voice.

Chapter Four presents a comparison of the novels and their respective representational techniques of "glimpsing" versus "looking sideways". While the distinct efficacy and implication of each approach is critically evaluated, both are ultimately found to make an invaluable addition to the literary exploration of slave subjectivity as attention is drawn to the interiority of each text's characters.

## OPSOMMING

Oor die afgelope drie dekades, het die dokumentasie wat opgelewer is deur historici in Suid-Afrika met betrekking tot die slawe in die Kaapkolonie floreer. Ooreenstemmend, het belangstelling in die geskiedenis van die slawe in die gebied van kultuur en letterkunde toegeneem. In hierdie konteks, word literatuur dikwels in diens geneem om op 'n verbeeldingsryke manier die subjektiewe standpunt en die bestaan van die slawe te verteenwoordig, wat vroeër in amptelike rekords dikwels sodanige innerlikheid uitsluit. Hierdie tesis is 'n studie van die voorstellings van slaaf subjektiwiteit in twee romans: Rayda Jacobs se *The Slave Book* (1998) en *Unconfessed* (2007) deur Yvette Christiansë. Dit beoog verder om ondersoek in te stel na die menigte lesings in literêre voorstellings en sodanige lesings uit te daag deur die vergelyking van die twee betrokke tekste.

Ek neem die "skramse" en "sywaartse" sienings as metodiek vir die eien en interpretasie van argief-materiaal in die twee tekste. Deurgaans in hierdie studie gebruik ek hierdie metodieke op hulle beurt ten einde die waarde van elke tegniek te demonstreer, in terme van die voorstellingshandeling wat elk gebruik om slaaf subjektiwiteit te verteenwoordig.

In Hoofstuk Een, word teoretiese perspektiewe oor 'herinnering' soos dit bestaan as gevolg van, en ten spyte van, die argief, beskryf en ontleed. In my oorsig van die rol en doel van die argief sowel as die onthou van 'n slaaf verlede in die hedendaagse Suid-Afrika, word benaderings wat in verskeie velde onderneem is om slawerny en sy slagoffers uit te beeld, ook in ag geneem. Ek identifiseer die noodsaaklikheid wat "stiltes" in die argief op skrywers plaas om oor slawe te skryf, asook die relevansie van die genre in hierdie onderneming. Ek kyk spesifiek na die romantiese en historiese fiksie genres soos hulle deur Jacobs en Christiansë gebruik word in hul voorstellings van slaaf subjektiwiteit, en hoe dit voorstellingshandeling beïnvloed. Hoofstuk Een word afgesluit met 'n kort uiteensetting van die literêre voorstellings, soos uitgebeeld in *The Slave Book* en *Unconfessed*.

Hoofstuk Twee is 'n ondersoek na die funksie van Rayda Jacobs se *The Slave Book* as 'n historiese fiksie-roman. Jacobs se roman bepeins die geskiedenis van slawerny deur die voorstellingshandeling van 'n "skramse kyk". Ek ondersoek die waarde van die romanse wat in die roman opgeneem word, sowel as Jacobs se gebruik van historiografie om haar verhaal te ondersteun.

Hoofstuk Drie fokus op Yvette Christiansë se *Unconfessed* en die wyse waarop die slaaf karakter as protagonis die stiltes as gemarginaliseerde aan die leser kommunikeer, en

daaropvolgend, die wyse waarop die historiese figuur, ten spyte van die stiltes in die argief, kommunikeer. Hierdie metodiek bestempel ek as die "sywaartse kyk". Ek argumenteer dat die stiltes in die roman 'n leemte laat vir 'n dieper begrip van die onreg en onderdrukking wat deur die protagonis gely word, en dat, ironies genoeg, dit hierdie stiltes is wat aan haar 'n "stem" gee.

Hoofstuk Vier is 'n vergelyking tussen die romans en hul doeltreffendheid. Al twee tekste, van ewe belang nagaande die bevordering van subjektiwiteit van slawe tydens die Kaapkolonie, beslaan elk 'n ander benadering tot die argief en geskiedenis self. Dit is met hierdie perspektiewe waarmee hierdie studie omgaan.

Beide tekste vorm 'n waardevolle toevoeging tot die literêre verkenning van slaaf subjektiwiteit deurdat aandag op die innerlikheid van elke teks se protagoniste gevestig word. Verder, deurdat die tekste met historiografie en die argief omgaan, spreek hulle diskursiewe kwessies rakende slaaf subjektiwiteit en die voorstellings daarvan aan.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The engagement with slave history in South Africa has changed course significantly in the past 30 years. Since the 1980s, the volume of historical documentation on slavery in the Cape Colony has increased immensely, while a preoccupation with slave history is further evident in other fields such as South African letters and cultures. This thesis is a study of the representations of slave subjectivity in two post-apartheid novels, Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book* (1998) and *Unconfessed* (2007) by Yvette Christiansë. It endeavours to explore the variety of readings made possible in these literary representations, and then to challenge such readings by juxtaposing the representational strategies of the two novels.

Both texts are works of historical fiction that undertake the present enquiry into representations of slavery and slave subjectivity in South African literature. Each novel evokes a compelling depiction of slave life and culture by drawing extensively on the increased availability of historical research on Cape slavery in the last three decades, including the archive itself. Jacobs's novel is named after the archival register that documents the buying and selling of Cape Colony slaves. Her novel, firmly located in the tradition of historical romance, traces the lives of three slaves, Sangora, Somiela and Noria, and their respective experiences under slavocracy. At the heart of her narrative is the prohibited romance between Somiela and her overseer Harman Kloot, a "white" man. By comparison, Christiansë's novel draws on a self-conscious narrative technique to relay the story of the historical figure Sila van den Kaap, who was incarcerated for the "kindermoord" (child murder) of her son, Baro. While the fact of Sila's crime cannot be questioned, Christiansë's narrative focuses on representations of slave interiority and the silencing thereof in archival records, which she posits as the impetus for her novel. By shifting focus from the "kindermoord", Christiansë apportions blame to the institution of slavocracy that caused Sila to perform this desperate act.

This introduction opens with a discussion of the shifting trend in the production of South African slave history from 1980 onwards, in order to highlight the significance of the engagement these literary texts undertake. In the light of Marita Wentzel's comment, following Karel Schoeman, that "the only documented information that can be obtained on slaves in South Africa relates either to their names, listed on slave auction records (with their place of origin appended), or to court documentation recording the criminal convictions of slaves" (94), I propose that literary texts undertaking the project of engaging with slave

subjectivity make an invaluable contribution to the field of slave history.<sup>1</sup> To this end, I briefly outline the reasons for the limited nature of current productions on slave history and, specifically, how apartheid has repressed this past and its representation. Subsequently, I explore emergences of slave history in post-apartheid cultures, letters and the public sphere. Following Pumla Gqola's concept of the re-visiting of the South African slave past as a "project of (re-)memory that has been increasingly embraced by creative writers in attempts to imagine the lives about which there is little historical record" ("Slaves" 45), I move to an analysis of *The Slave Book* and *Unconfessed* as primary texts that explore representations of slave subjectivity.

Chapter Two investigates *The Slave Book* as a project undertaken by Jacobs to speak simultaneously of slaves' existence and subjectivity. The novel postulates itself as a work of historical romance fiction. Following Jacobs' admission that *The Slave Book* is merely a "scratch at the surface" of the subjectivity alluded to in historiography and made possible in historical fiction, I scrutinize the writer's representational technique of blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction in order to exemplify her exploration of spaces that offer this insight. I argue that these spaces are presented as moments at which the text seeks to convey slave subjectivity, from within and without of historical discourses. Jacobs employs a methodology of "glimpsing" at the slave past through representations made available by historiography and congruently these "glimpses" establish a focus on interiority and humanise slave characters.

Chapter Three suggests a more self-conscious approach to narrative, as is explored in relation to *Unconfessed*. It opens with a discussion of the methodology undertaken by Christiansē in her research for the novel, in order to highlight the various forms of silencing within the archive, as well as in historical representation, with which her novel emphatically engages. Subsequently, I analyse *Unconfessed* as embodying Toni Morrison's act of (re-)memory, described by Gqola above, in order to establish whether it succeeds in consciously reflecting on the nature of and specific reasons for the appearance of archival and historical information. (Gqola, "Slaves" 48). In contrast to the linear romance mode of Jacobs's narrative, Christiansē uses a strict deviation from linear narrative temporalities in favour of fragmented and achronological plot structures in order to accommodate the silence at the heart of its narrative and to show how narrative, in itself, can subjugate. I read Christiansē's representation of these silences as "acts of looking sideways" at the discursive practices

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<sup>1</sup> It is assumed that Marita Wentzel's comment refers to the stark absence of "slave voices" in the archive, in the form of documents recording slave narrations and experiences. However, I would like to mention the in-depth court record concerning the trial proceedings of the "Galant revolt", employed by André Brink in *A Chain of Voices*, which records extensive testimonies of the slaves responsible for the murders of their owners, as well as the reasons for the homicides.

inherent in the historical documentation of slave voices that enact her resistance to “filling” these silences with detailed narrative. I argue that her use of this “silent” narrative mode indicates an awareness and engagement with what Verne Harris calls “the imperative for contextualisation to reveal the multiple layers of construction in text, or of the need to disclose archival contextualisation as yet another layer” (151). The various forms of silence in the narrative allow for a deeper understanding of the injustices and oppression suffered by Sila van den Kaap, and that it is these silences, ironically, which grant her voice.

Chapter Four compares *Unconfessed* and *The Slave Book* and the representational technique of each as novels of the historical fiction genre. André Brink stresses, “reinventing the past through the imagination involves primarily, as we have seen, a peculiar machination of memory. And memory, which is always and even per definition selective, comprises not only acts of recovery but also processes of suppression” (“Interrogating Silence” 36). *Unconfessed* actively engages with this question of subjectivity in its representations of slave characters through the application of a post-modern narrative strategy, and shows a keen cognisance of that which can and cannot be said. A divergence from a historical romance fiction narrative, as is present in *The Slave Book*, may show how the silenced spaces offered by *Unconfessed* point “towards an intimation that something may in fact have happened, but that we can never be sure of it or gain access to it, and that the best we can do is to fabricate metaphors – that is, to tell stories – in which, not history, but imaginings of history are invented” (Brink, “Interrogating Silence” 42). *Unconfessed* eventually resembles a communication between character portrayal, text and reader as the hegemonic discourses contained within “historically truthful” representations of memory are either re-negotiated, re-constructed, or at the very least, engaged with consciously, aware that “the challenge to represent slave characters is one that needs to be sensitively confronted since these writers do not wish to cast their slave characters in ways which reshackle them” (Gqola, “Slaves” 47). I conclude with a discussion on reading the historical archive “sideways” as opposed to “glimpsing” it, in order to focus on the re-reading of history through memory, with a deeper exploration of the representations of slave subjectivity and agency.

## 1.1 Productions and Suppressions of Slave History in South Africa: A Brief Overview

In the introduction to his significant work *Slavery in Dutch South Africa*, the historian Nigel Worden briefly explains that the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States of America led to a dramatic increase in the study of slavery in American

history. This study comprised models of comparison between the plantation systems in North America and other societies in the world which depended on slavery “as a system of labour and exploitation”, reaching as far as colonial Europe, medieval Korea, the ancient world and Africa (1-2). As a result, interest in South African slavery grew in the 1980s and contested previous opinions concerning the nature of slave life in the Cape Colony. While it is not my intention to imply that archival registers and depositories produced pre-1980 should be considered insignificant or inconsiderable, I would like to draw attention to the shift in historiographical perspective evident pre-1980 to post-1980. Writing in 1985, Worden reports that

[t]he traditional belief that the economy of the Cape colony before the nineteenth century was stagnant and pre-capitalistic has led to the view that slavery was relatively mild in comparison with the export-oriented staple plantations of North America and the Caribbean. The assumed low levels of profitability of Cape farming and the isolation of the colony from external market forces led to the belief that Cape slaves were not intensively exploited as a labour force and were primarily domestic servants, treated with care and a high degree of paternal kindness, which contrasted with the violence of the coercive plantation systems that existed in other slave societies (“Slavery” 2).

Following Worden, an array of authors published extensive historical research in this field. These include, most notably, R. Elphick and H. Giliomee (eds.), *The Shaping of South African Society, 1652–1820* (1979), Robert Ross’s *Cape of Torments* (1983), Worden’s *Slavery in Dutch South Africa* (1985), Robert Shell’s *Children of Bondage: A Social History of The Slave Society at the Cape of Good Hope, 1652–1838* (1994), Elizabeth A. Eldredge and Fred Morton’s edited collection *Slavery in South Africa: Captive Labor on the Dutch Frontier* (1994), Pamela Scully’s *Gender and Slave Emancipation in the Atlantic World* (2005), Wayne Dooling’s *Slavery, Emancipation and Colonial Rule in South Africa* (2007) and various works by Karel Schoeman.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the growing interest in slave history, the gravity of this past as constituent of South African heritage was still undervalued. Nigel Worden and Clifton Crais state that, “from the perspectives of popular memory and the scholarly literatures on the history of unfree labour and South Africa, slavery and emancipation in the nineteenth-century Cape Colony appears both undramatic and inconsequential” (“Breaking the Chains” 1). That is, to

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<sup>2</sup> See Schoeman, Karel. 1999. *Armosyn van die Kaap: Voorspel tot Vestiging, 1415-1651*. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau; Schoeman, Karel. 2001. *Armosyn van die Kaap: Die Wêreld van 'n Slavin, 1652-1733*. Cape Town: Human and Rousseau; Schoeman, Karel. *Early Slavery at the Cape of Good Hope 1652-1717*. Pretoria: Protea Book House, 2007.

the early scholars of the nineteenth century, Cape Colony slavery paled, both in nature and consequence, in comparison to the infamous torture, suffering and exploitation resultant from American slavery. The statement by Worden and Crais raises two very important aspects concerning perspectives on the representation of slavery. The first emphasises a general attitude towards Cape Colonial slave history as an insignificant and “inconsequential” constituent of South African history, which had no impact on present day nationalism. The second, subtler point is suggested by the use of “undramatic”. Prior to the rise in interest in Cape Colonial slavery as of 1980 and onwards, the subordination experienced by slaves during this period of slavocracy was generally seen as mild, compared to other slavocratic institutions. This points towards a traditional disregard for slave subjectivity and experience and ultimately raises questions of representation of not only the period of history itself, but the experiences of those cast as subordinate within it. In addition, the preoccupation with slave history was eclipsed in social consciousness by the more recent apartheid era.

### 1.1.1 The Amnesiac Blow

In an interview with Tavis Smiley following the publication of *Unconfessed* in 2007, Yvette Christiansë comments that apartheid dealt an “amnesiac blow” to the revision of slave history in South Africa. That is, under the immediacy of our country’s most recent period of human rights violation, a past as distant as the eighteenth century seemed far less pressing to revisit and reclaim. In the light of this opinion, the projects undertaken by Jacobs and Christiansë are important as both texts engage with this “hidden” past in attempts to bring the significance of slavery in present day South Africa to the surface and to mark a return of this past to public discourse.

The occlusion of slave history and suppression of slave memory has a long and multifarious discursive origin. Worden succinctly summarises the practice of social and historical distancing of slave history in his article “The Changing Politics of Slave Heritage”.<sup>3</sup> Slavery at the Cape was abolished on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December 1834. But even on this day, the slaves’ freedom was withheld from them. Instead, they were forcibly entered into periods of apprenticeship lasting four years, a practice which supposedly prepared them for a future as wage-earning labourers, yet bound them to their owners in much the same way their previous positions as slaves had. Slavocracy only finally reached its termination in 1838, after which the celebration of Emancipation Day on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December had become an annual practice during the nineteenth century.

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<sup>3</sup> An immense debt is owed to Nigel Worden for the extensive research he has conducted on this subject.

However, at the turn of the twentieth century slavery was “no longer a desirable heritage in a society where increasingly pervasive social and political segregation had made whiteness the most desirable social attribute” (Worden, “Changing Politics” 25). This resulted in a distancing from slave ancestry by members of racial groups who identified themselves as “Coloured”, in order to avoid being racially segregated as “Black” or “Native” (Worden, “Changing Politics” 25). This attitude was carried into the 1950s with the inauguration of apartheid, at which stage “public awareness of slave heritage was well buried” (Worden, “Changing Politics” 25). Scholars such as Worden and Ward show that the institution of apartheid, as well as the attitude of many Cape families who had ancestral slave roots, suppressed any ties to this period in order to claim a position of white supremacy.<sup>4</sup> N.J. Gibson explains that social identities during apartheid were “constructed along boundaries of ‘difference’ based on static perceptions of racial and cultural divisions understood to be ‘at the centre of culture’” (595). The scrupulous policing of racial and social boundaries, was therefore integral to the sustainment of this institution, and the divide between cultures was greatly encouraged and emphasised in order to ensure its perpetuation. A denial of slave heritage as a constituent of South African history was therefore integral to apartheid’s institutionalisation of white supremacy. Indeed, Worden points out that “[u]nder apartheid, school history textbooks, museums, tourist sites and heritage memorialisation focused on settler history and completely neglected the slave past” (“Changing Politics” 24). Zoë Wicomb places further emphasis on different racial groups, especially “Coloureds”, occluding or denying roots in slave ancestry in attempts to sever ties to a history which she argues they experienced as “shameful” under apartheid’s definitions of race<sup>5</sup> as, “it is, after all, the very nature of shame to stifle its own discourse” (92).

As resistance against apartheid intensified, it was demanded that a “diverse” history be discounted in order to form a united “black” front against apartheid. That is to say, “unity between all of those defined as ‘non-white’ by the apartheid state meant that a distinct slave heritage was played down in the interests of a common struggle for liberation” (Worden, “Changing Politics” 26). Therefore, despite the growing dismantling of institutionalised apartheid, the practice of negating a slave past gained ground, supported by the radical dichotomisation of society under apartheid into black and white (and its construction of

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<sup>4</sup>See K. Ward. “Captive Audiences: Remembering and Forgetting the History of Slavery in Cape Town, South Africa” in D.P. Ahluwalia and P. Nurse-Bray, eds, *Post Colonialisation: Culture and Identity in Africa*. New York: Nova Science Publications, 1997

<sup>5</sup>Wicomb, Zoë. “Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa”. *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy 1970 – 1995*. Derek Attridge & Rosemary Jane Jolly. Eds. Cambridge University Press, 1998.



coloureds as “buffer” which the identification with either blackness or whiteness sought to reject).

The suppression of a history that was in any way related to slavery became manifest in a pervasive tradition of the denunciation of slave roots, and the pronouncement of any such existing roots as shameful. The prevalent nature of this tradition has seen its application endure from the initial abolishment of slavery and continue into South Africa’s democratic era. This has prevailed despite social and political efforts to recast it otherwise.

## **1.2 Identity in Post-Apartheid South Africa and a Re-emergence of Slave Histories**

As apartheid ended the need for intra-racial unity dissolved and, conversely, differences in race and culture were celebrated under blanket terms such as “the rainbow nation” or “multicultural nation”. This in turn saw a reclamation of roots in slave ancestries in a commemoration of that which marked cultural differences. As Ciraj Rassool comments, the application of the term “rainbow nation” strove to unite racial and cultural differences in the interest of post-apartheid national identities under a characterisation of “diversity” (1). In the aftermath of apartheid, then, specifically with the institution of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the country was directed towards the reconciliation of varied identities through a process of a collective and public “cathartic closure from the apartheid past within a framework of “forgiveness” (Gibson 595) aimed at “national healing”. The trend for the construction of national identities in the past 50 years denotes an oscillation between identities marked as different and stigmatised by apartheid, and a need for transcendence of this stigmatisation through unity. This is problematised by South Africans frequently being grouped under collective terms such as “The Rainbow Nation”, which attempt to provide a correlation and agreement between individual and collective identity, yet is inherently fixated on markers of difference between cultures.

To Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, the problematic construction of identities pre-and post-apartheid lies in the inconsistency with which “difference” is treated: from a shunning of races and cultures deemed “undesirable” due to stigmatization by apartheid legislature to a reclamation and acclamation of said cultures in order to transcend the past. This “transcendence”, under the blanket term of “Rainbow Nation” is ill-fitting for, to Nuttall and Michael, it glosses over the complex discrepancies inherent in its construction.

As Gibson explains,

For persons in the new South Africa, overcoming boundaries of ‘difference’ as a process of nation building remains difficult in practice. One concern is that public discourses of cultural diversity and heritage in the new South Africa emphasise separate histories ... Consequently, it is claimed that there is a perception of a fragmented, rather than unified, understanding and divided ownership of South Africa’s past, which does nothing to re-site boundaries between groups or establish a shared historical narrative for South Africans (596).

This re-establishes the need for concepts that are able to engage with identities in post-1994 South Africa as cognizant of their separate histories yet which function as integral parts to a larger “whole”. Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael’s concept of “creolisation”, which significantly recognises the presence of a slave past, offers compelling reading regarding the construction of identities in post-1994 South Africa. They posit “creolisation” as a synthesis of different cultures, religions and languages to create a new culture (6). Oppositional thinking, when it comes to identity construction in South Africa, is therefore discouraged in favour of this notion of “creolisation”, which relies on a sense of “connectedness and intimacy” between the different traces of original cultures inherent in the new “social organization.” (Nuttall and Michael 22). Furthermore, their concept of a “creolisation” between “mutually shared referents of belonging and similarity” is what encapsulates the notion of a collective identity. Social identities have therefore shifted “to a more dynamic and flexible interpretation of identity, focusing on process, in which identity is complex, flexible and multiple” (Gibson 595). In other words, a move away from apartheid’s static construction and markers of identity, towards a dynamic and flexible construction of social identity post-apartheid, as Rassool explores, is dependent upon an integration of individual and shared histories.

A reading for Nuttall and Michael’s construction of “creolisation” is therefore apt with regards to new emerging cultures and identities in post-apartheid South Africa. More significantly, their concept of “creolisation” incorporates the presence of a slave history in what they posit as the South African version of creolisation. In addition, it has been claimed that “the cultural heritage of the slaves cannot be separated and kept apart from the heritage of others” (Cornell 278). In this regard, it is significant to note that critics such as Zimitri Erasmus investigate how there has recently been reclamation of different histories in order to construct and inform social identities. “Creolisation” implies an act of self-conscious reclamation of a variety of identities and cultures, which, I argue, is achieved through an



appropriation of the memory of slave history. I would suggest that identity within a post-apartheid, post-1994 South Africa is constantly in (re)negotiation with its larger, national collective; it relies on appropriating the memory of this forgotten slave past and its submerged present, which has been subsumed by the more recent traumatic past, in order to integrate these individual and shared identities, which have had massive effects on the building of a national heterogeneity. Gqola writes that memory and its significance in the formation of post-apartheid identity “is premised on the understanding that all memory is unavoidably both borne out of individual subjective experience and shaped by collective consciousness and shared social processes, so that any understanding of the representation of remembrances and of the past more generally must necessarily take into account both contexts” (“Slaves” 8).

My reading of the emergences of slave history in South African cultures and letters was informed by Gqola’s argument, specifically because these respective spaces convey the engagement with the shared and individual histories of which she speaks. It hence becomes clear in my argument that the remembrance of a slave past is integrally present in the constant and fluid re-construction of national – and individual – identity, as is suggested by the growing presence and reclamation of South Africa’s slave history. Reclamation is a process that is achieved both visually and more subjectively – matters that will be discussed in the ensuing subsection and section, respectively.

### 1.2.1 Remembering the Slave Past: Visible Emergences of Slave History

Rassool writes that, in contrast to their previously hidden status, reclamations of histories “have erupted into the public sphere in visual form” (5), and points towards an unearthing of previously submerged, obscured, and denied histories. Gqola reinforces this view regarding slave history in particular by stating that “slave memory [has] increase[d] in visibility in post-apartheid South Africa” (“Slaves” 11).

In 1996, the “1 December Movement” – named after Emancipation Day, the day upon which the abolition of slavery has traditionally been celebrated – “consciously use[d] slavery and slave emancipation as a unifying image” (Worden, “Changing Politics” 29) for nationality. A wreath was ceremoniously laid on the site of the “Old Slave Tree”, which is the historical location for the slave auctions. In the same year, Thabo Mbeki included the following in his famous “I am an African” address to the nation:

In my veins courses the blood of the Malay slaves who came from the East.  
Their proud dignity informs my bearing, their culture a part of my essence. The  
stripes they bore on their bodies from the lash of the slave master are a reminder

embossed on my consciousness of what should not be done (qtd. in Worden, “Changing Politics” 29).

Mbeki’s speech, in similar vein to the “1 December Movement”, creates an image of unity, but more importantly, also a notion of shared histories in conversation with each other. “Slaves, and specifically slaves from outside Africa, were associated in this way with others whose suffering had contributed to the making of the new nation” (Worden, “Changing Politics” 29).

Rapidly, more instances of the remembrance of slave history and its recognition as constituent of South African history emerged. Rassool notes that “a framework for memorialisation has begun to unfold which seeks to construct forms of observance, remembrance and commemoration which would be a ‘symbolic acknowledgement of our neglected, marginalised and distorted heritage’” (10). This is seen in the countless public emergences of slave memory and celebration of its history in the city of Cape Town.

In 1997, a guided walk touring Cape Town called the “Slave Route” was proposed.<sup>6</sup> The tour was intended to attract tourist interest to the city and would stop at numerous slave sites and museums along a specific route. The Cultural History Museum was officially renamed the Slave Lodge in 1998, while four years later, a commemorative tree was planted at the site of the “Old Slave Tree”. In 2003 an archaeological discovery produced between 2000 and 3000 skeletons at a site in the central business district of Cape Town, known as Prestwich Place. Studies suggest that some of these bones belonged to slaves, as the site was known to be a burial ground during colonial times. Significantly, a “Hands off Prestwich Place” organisation was formed to protest the archaeological excavation of the site by an organisation called the Special Focus Reference Group (SFRG) largely consisting of UCT archaeologists.<sup>7</sup> The formulation of “Hands off Prestwich Place” showed growing investment in, and a sense of, ownership of the slave past. Protesters felt that investigation into the burial site was mainly motivated by scientific research as opposed to interest in memorialisation. However, the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA) ruled that the skeletons were to be exhumed and relocated to another location. Worden interprets the events at Prestwich Place in the light of two interconnected issues:

One was an assertion on the part of ordinary Capetonians – and particularly those who had previously been excluded from the city’s history – that the skeletal remains belonged to them [...] Secondly, the campaign also revealed

<sup>6</sup> For a critique of tourist re-visitations of locations of slave ‘history’ see Hartman. “The Time of Slavery”. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 101.4 (2002).

<sup>7</sup> ([http://www.archivalplatform.org/blog/entry/prestwich\\_place/](http://www.archivalplatform.org/blog/entry/prestwich_place/)).

differing concepts of what validated and constituted knowledge about slavery.

(Worden, “Changing Politics” 38)

The controversy at Prestwich Place therefore indicates a mobilisation towards the recognition of slave history and the incorporation of its memory as part of its heritage. Indeed, as Julian Jonker notes, “Father Michael Weeder, the main organiser of the campaign, told the media: ‘A plaque is insufficient. It is an insignificant gesture. Those skeletons are the ancestors of everybody’” (192). The controversy thus stresses a different approach to the interpretation or “observance” of this memory, and moves away from the kinds of “fixed” markers of identity that apartheid legislation tried to impose. More importantly, Prestwich Place stresses reclamation of slave ancestry and the personal roots that lie therein.

In 2008, Helen Zille, then the mayor of Cape Town, memorialised slavery by erecting a public monument at the site of the ‘Old Slave Tree’. The monument, which consists of various black marble slabs, is reminiscent of the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, in an attempt to honour the victimisation of slaves, and the privation and tribulation they endured. Zille’s speech at the official opening, fittingly held on Heritage Day, stressed the need to “preserve the memory of the enslaved, to prevent their contribution from being lost” (qtd. in Worden, “Changing Politics” 39). While this raised concerns about the “triumphalist memorialisation” of slavery, it is difficult to deny the fact that “in contrast to its earlier neglect and suppression, Cape slave heritage is one which both the local and national state and the tourist industry are anxious to promote” (Worden, “Changing Politics” 39) due to the upsurge in the public emergence of this history. While the reclamation of this past is rather ambivalent, or at the very least has competing interests, a shift from the hidden to the discernible reclamation of this once silent history has nonetheless started to appear in public and social spheres. Furthermore, the monument reflects an awareness of the subjection of the slaves, their personal suffering, and implies recognition of this individualisation.

The emergence of slave history was not limited to public and political memorialisation. As attention shifted to visible reclamations of slave ancestry, awareness grew in cultural works as well. “Dis Nag – The Cape’s Hidden Roots in Slavery” is a collaborative art exhibition which took place at the Slave Lodge in 1998. The exhibition opened on the eve of Heritage Day, on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, as an attempt by artists from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with the hidden past of slavery in contemporary Cape Town. The artists were encouraged to approach slave history not as an isolated historical period, but from within a larger relational and historical perspective. This was brought about through extensive workshops during which artists attended a series of talks and presentations on slave history in order to provide them with the historical background of the period. Interaction

between the various participants was encouraged in order to stimulate individual and collective responses to this history, and ultimately establish the link between the past and present. One such striking example was noticeable in the discovery by two artists that their surnames indicated an ancestry in slavery, as both surnames were begotten of calendar months.<sup>8</sup> This moment tellingly establishes once again the hidden nature of slave history, and the ignorance we usually have regarding our connection to it, as both artists, preceding their discovery, had been unaware of any personal connection with the history of slavery. A more poignant point was made through the workshops and consequent engagement between artists and history:

the workshops enabled these artists to perceive themselves as embedded in, and belonging to, an interwoven, multifaceted and complex South African history of colonisation, slavery and apartheid...[and] a less publicly explored period of the Cape's history, as something that was not culturally divided, but collectively owned". (Gibson 602 - 612)

Worden notes "[s]everal theatrical shows using slave music and oral traditions were mounted, which were enthusiastically received by large audiences" ("Changing Politics" 33).<sup>9</sup> In 2007, Mark Fleischman, associate professor and head of the drama department at the University of Cape Town, produced a physical theatre piece entitled *Cargo*. In collaboration with Jazzart Dance Theatre and Magnet Theatre, this production staged a performance based on an engagement with the archives of Cape slavery. The title *Cargo*, refers to human cargo as well trade cargo, and simultaneously presents images of people being shipped around the world much like the commodities they were sold alongside. The press release for the production read as follows:

The production takes as its foundation the fact that for 186 years cargos of porcelain, silks, spices and slaves from Mozambique, Madagascar, Indonesia and India were a major part of the culture of the Cape and uses performance to re-imagine and bring to life this history. Such history is also feeding into initiatives at UCT this year to reflect on the University's past and the land it is built on. According to Martin Hall, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at UCT responsible for Transformation, this process has to include an acknowledgement of slavery

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<sup>8</sup> Naming slaves according to the months in which they were procured was a frequent practice during slavocracy in order to establish mastership over slaves. The phenomenon of these surnames in modern society usually indicates a likelihood of genealogy.

<sup>9</sup> Worden mentions the musicals *Rosa* (1996) and *Ghoema* (2005), the play *Salaam Stories* (2003) and *Cargo* (2007).

as slavery is an integral part of the history of UCT. Today, aspects of Cape Town's colonial slave past still haunt the city but have largely been forgotten or are ignored. Yet acknowledging and remembering the past is a critical part of transformation ... Since 1994, all South Africans have been on a journey to find out who they are and where they come from – acknowledging the country's slave history – and celebrating how far we have come since then – is an important part of this journey. (*Cargo Media Release*)

This press release highlights several key concepts regarding memory and representation of slave history in contemporary, post-apartheid South Africa. Fleishmann's recital of the list of commodities, of which slaves were one, neatly encapsulates the ideology of slavocracy (to which the title refers): the lawful trade in ownership over people. In fact, it is within a list very similar to this that Christiansē discovers the name of the protagonist of *Unconfessed*. Mention of the slaves concomitantly with commodities categorises them as mere goods and reveals the absolute constriction of any agency allocated to slaves. In listing them alongside the spices, porcelain and silk that were traded, they were commodified and refused any sense of subjectivity, which the word "cargo" emphasises. Secondly, the "hidden" or "silent" nature of slave history in Cape Town is pointed out, along with the post-1994 tendency to uncover this history. Political transitions in South Africa brought about reclamation of personal history, public history and thereby heritage, as South Africans were encouraged to explore individual identity formation under the umbrella of a collective, yet diverse, national identity. This exploration is spurred on by an active undertaking of remembering the past and negotiating its presence in the present.

If the reclamation of slave history is an important component of current cultural and social identity, as Gqola discusses, the re-reading of this history through memory, with a higher level of engagement with regards to the representation of slave agency is important. To Gqola, memory "requires a higher, more fraught level of activity to the past than simply identifying and recording it" ("Slaves" 8). That is, it necessitates a conscious revisiting of the past and engagement with its complexities. The following facet of *Cargo*'s programme echoes this sentiment:

*Cargo* is a performative engagement with the archive of slavery at the Cape ...

The work is an attempt to use performance to get at what has been left out, the voices and their bodies 'exiled on the borders of discourse ... the murmur and the noises from which the process of scriptural reproduction distinguishes itself' (De Certeau). It is a difficult task because the bodies are not immediately or

easily available ... To remember is not to forget, it is also to make present, and, most importantly, it is to put the body back together again. (*Cargo*)

### 1.3 Literary Representations: *The Slave Book* and *Unconfessed*

An increased literary engagement with slave history had occurred. As Worden notes, “a number of books about slavery aimed at a popular rather than an academic market also appeared in the course of the early 2000s” (“Changing Politics” 33).<sup>10</sup> *Unconfessed* and *The Slave Book* emerge from this growing literary interest in slave history. While their respective sources differ, both novels draw extensively on historiography and the archive in order to locate their narrative firmly within the Cape Colonial context. In addition, the novels, as works of historical fiction, enjoy the advantage of being able to allow for the exploration of slave subjectivity, which I argue cannot be achieved by the afore discussed public, political and cultural contexts. Indeed, the ability to access the subjective mind and repository is a benefit uniquely afforded the literary field.

#### 1.3.1 Memory and The Archive

The representation of slave history and memory in literature has appositely given rise to some interest, specifically for the purposes of this thesis. The emergence of slave history in public spaces has encouraged scholars such as Gqola to write on the significance and importance of excavating slave memory in contemporary society. It is here that both Christiansë’s and Jacobs’s novels are of pivotal importance, for these novels engage with the “dis-remembered” past and the act of re-memory for which Gqola highlights the need:

Re-memory invites the creative writer or artist to ‘journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply’ (Morrison 1987:112). This filling in, recasting, relooking, reformulating (both of memory and history) outside historiography is Toni Morrison’s rememory. It is a necessary project because ‘[t]he past is only available through textual traces’ and these are necessary in order to re-humanise the ‘disremembered and unaccounted for’ (Chabot Davies 2002: n.p.) (9).

<sup>10</sup> Worden mentions Rayda Jacobs’s novel *The Slave Book* (1998, republished in 2007), and *A. Mountain, An Unsung Heritage: Perspectives on Slavery* (2004), while Russel Brownlee’s *Garden of Plagues* (2005), Theresa Benadé’s *Kites of Good Fortune* (2004), *Islands* (2002) by Dan Sleight and André P Brink (translator) and *A Chain of Voices* (1982) and *Rights of Desire* (2000) both by Brink, can be added to this list.

However, these textual traces are to be in constant negotiation with an awareness of their inherent ideological qualities. Christiansē comments as follows on the available historical representation of slaves at the Cape Colony: “All that is left is the archive, and the archive has a specific way of speaking about them” (Christiansē in Smiley np). Christiansē’s statement refers to what Annie Coombes describes as “the contested nature of historical memory and knowledge and of the power relations involved in the production of such knowledge” (10). Gqola’s manner of constructing “memory” is thus indispensable to engagement with the archive as it inculcates a sensitive awareness of the inherent ideologies that exist in historical archiving, textual traces of history, and these representations of the past. It is for this reason that I adopted this approach to inform my analysis of the treatment of the representational complexities of the historical past in each novel, as well as their respective engagement with archival and historiographical data.

Margaret Lenta writes that “[a]uthentic slave voices are beyond recovery” (99). This can largely be attributed to the silencing nature of the Cape Colonial archive and its discursive encryption of slave voice within the archive.<sup>11</sup> My engagement with the archive rests on the understanding that it consists of the depository of legal documents, registers, letters and correspondence and scribes of court proceedings -- that is, all documents recording colonial practice and engagement. It is in line with Achille Mbembe’s definition of the archive as “the product of a process which converts a certain number of documents into items judged to be worthy of preserving and keeping in a public space, where they can be consulted according to well-established procedures and regulations” (20). Mbembe draws attention to the selective process pertaining to the inclusion of documents within the archive and states that “[w]e often forget that not all documents are destined to be archives. In any given cultural system, only some documents fulfil the criteria of ‘archivability’” (19). Slave voices, that is, any form of slave narrative, are omitted from the archive for the express reason that they are not deemed “archivable”. Yvette Christiansē mentions that upon undertaking her research in the archive, she was met by palpable silences where slave voices were completely omitted from various depositories.<sup>12</sup> These silences or omissions are attributable to the hierarchical nature of the selective process relating to archiving documents. Gqola notes that “[r]ecording history has been predominantly the preserve of the conqueror and it is this condition which has been conventionally sanctioned as paramount and universal.” (“Slaves” 43) She adds that “[a]ttempts to locate the corresponding evaluations from the perspective of the Other within

<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Yvette Christiansē’s own experience of conducting archival research rendered her at a loss for the minimal number of slave voices recorded in the archive, in stark contrast to the ample slave narratives found in the US. This argument will be developed fully in Chapter Three.

<sup>12</sup> A full elaboration of Christiansē’s research and the nature of these silences within the archive will be presented in Chapter Two as framework to my analysis of her novel, *Unconfessed*.



History pose a challenge since “racism is especially rampant in places and people that produce knowledge.” (43). Therefore, according to colonial discourse, slaves were seen as subordinate, and priority was given to the documentation of the “master’s history” (Gqola, “Slaves” 44). Moreover, in comparison to North American slaves, slaves at the Cape were predominantly illiterate and could therefore not produce lasting narratives of their own.<sup>13</sup> Marita Wentzel mentions, accordingly, that slaves “were unable to articulate themselves either verbally or in writing, as they were prohibited from protesting against their fate in public and were for the most part illiterate” (93).

If authentic slave voices are therefore beyond recovery, what, then, can be recovered? Harris’s claim that, “[e]ven if archivists in a particular country were to preserve every record generated throughout the land, they would still have only a sliver of a window into that country’s experience” (135); archives thus speak more of loss than remembrance. And that which has been lost cannot authentically be retrieved. What then constitutes this retrieval process? Sarah Nuttall considers “how we can use the fecundity, the instability, of literary texts to rethink our notion of the archive itself: how we can project the dynamism of the literary project back onto the archive so that the border between the literary text and the archive begins to shift and refigure?” (283).

I am of the persuasion that *The Slave Book* and *Unconfessed* fall in line with Nuttall’s suggestion that literary texts are a useful medium through which the many historical traces contained within the archive may be explored, and that they particularly harness the construction of memory and (re)memory, as theorised by Gqola, in order to successfully approach a meaningful engagement with slave subjectivity. Gqola writes that “[w]hat is necessary if writers are to invent credible and artistic literature is an attempt at a sincere imaginative perception that sees [the life being portrayed] as having a certain human validity” (“Slaves” 47) – the kind of validity that was denied by the colonial institution. Drawing on Morrison and Homi Bhabha, she posits (re)memory as a conscious, willed act that constitutes an imaginative revisiting of the fragments of history “in which ‘the point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way’” (Morrison qtd. in Gola, “Slaves” 48).

*The Slave Book* presents this imaginative venture as a “glimpse” in which Jacobs draws on historiography based on archival research, and represents a fictional exploration of the facts pertaining to the historical context of the Cape Colony slavocracy and their extenuating circumstances. To Jacobs, the “glimpse” is an exploration into slave interiority and subjectivity, something which history and the archive fairly occludes, while grounding

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<sup>13</sup> The autobiography of Frederick Douglass is a well-known example of a narrative written by a slave.



her plot firmly within the historical context, thereby attaining historical accuracy. *Unconfessed* offers an explicit engagement with the politics and complexities inherent in the archive's accumulation, selection and representation of its documents and, more pertinently, documentation that pertains specifically to slaves. As *Unconfessed* contains a myriad of silences within its plot, which is firmly grounded in the archival research conducted by the author, I investigate Christiansē's use of this narrative technique as reflection of the occlusions of slave voice, subjectivity and interiority found within the archive. I trace the way in which *Unconfessed* presents its engagement with the archive as an act of "looking sideways" or obliquely at the silences and echoes, and the reasons for their respective presences.

### 1.3.2 Agency and Silence

The genre of historical fiction is rooted in historical accuracy. To this end, the task of a writer such as Rayda Jacobs involves depicting narratives that correlate accurately with factual accounts available for scrutiny, and through this attempt to expose the lives of the slaves at the Cape, thereby affording this subject some significance as well as seeking to restore that which has been omitted from history, incorporating within this restoration an exploration of the subjectivity of the slaves themselves. Her novel uses factual accounts and historically correct recordings of the period of slavocracy at the Cape to present the plight of the subordinated from the perspective of her central slave characters. The silenced voices are those of the figures who were marginalised, not only in history, but through it as well.

I am aware of arguments critiquing "the idea that the task of the social historian is to 'give the slaves back their agency'" (Johnson 114). Walter Johnson states that "[b]y continuing to frame their works as 'discoveries' of Black humanity, indeed, historians unwittingly reproduce the set terms and analytical limits of a field of contest (black humanity: for or against) framed by the white-supremacist assumptions which made it possible to ask such a question in the first place" (114). Johnson argues that "agency" and "humanity" need not be read in terms of resistance, for to do so would paradoxically acknowledge the ideology that defines slaves as subordinate and thereby admit to an omission of these terms. Instead, he posits "agency" as an invocation of "the idea of the condition of enslaved humanity, to try to think, at once, about the bare life existence of slaves, the ways they suffered in and resisted slavery and the way they flourished in slavery, not in the sense of loving their slavery, but in the sense of loving themselves and one another" (115).

The romance mode Jacobs adopts in her depiction of slave lives in *The Slave Book* falls in line with Johnson's argument. Jacobs explores sites which simultaneously speak of slave experience and subjectivity, thereby excavating signs of agency. My analysis of *The Slave Book* therefore explores what this type of representation would suggest and whether it offers a restriction, or "binding" to one (historical) perspective, carrying with it ideologies and discourses which could render its various subjects chained to purely historically subordinate representations. Louise Bethlehem identifies a similar issue in apartheid writing: "Writers and readers collectively assume that literature and life in South Africa maintain a mimetic or one-to-one relationship, that writing provides a supposedly unmediated access to the real, and that the transparent rendering of South African life is a type of 'resistance' to apartheid that can and often does trigger representative intervention" (94), or, in other words, "the idea that the writer opposes [a system] through exposing it" (95). In my opinion, it is exactly this kind of "resistance" to which Jacobs aspires in the rendering of her historically detailed novel, and my analysis of her novel explores its usefulness.

Nthabiseng Motsemme argues that a register of silence is often useful in violent and traumatic cases. "This is because they tap primarily into factors beyond the present conditions of existence. Here we encounter an inner world governed by the imagination and a language that refuses to be confined to narrow racist and sexist forms of validation" ("The Mute" 924). A shift is therefore indicated from exterior modes of articulation to interior forms of articulation. André Brink writes that "[m]uch of the confusion arises from the fact that while both these approaches – the 'historical' and the 'textual' – may be read as responses to silence, they have been regarded for too long, and by too many, as almost mutually exclusive" ("Interrogating Silence" 17). Brink, like Bethlehem, seems to be of the opinion that the act of narration itself needs to be re-evaluated and re-applied as subversion does not so much entail a change in subject matter, as a change in perception, which accompanies a change in representation. The value of silence to instil agency therefore becomes a viable question.

Christiansë's narrative is perforated with silences, conveying the occlusion of slave voices from the archives. These gaps of knowledge due to an incomplete and stifled archive on slave history are drawn on, suggesting the archive's inability fully to represent complete histories. An analysis of *Unconfessed* explores the perforations in the texts, which exist as omissions, fragments and "unconfessions", which open silent spaces in which the slave protagonist's disempowerment is represented in the scant information available to us.

### 1.3.3 Representational Form: Historical Fiction, Romance and Self-Conscious Narration

Both novels rely on the representational form of their respective narratives in order to engage with the issues as discussed above. The casting of *The Slave Book* as historical romance fiction is intrinsically linked to Jacobs's exploration of slave subjectivity as it facilitates the presentation of its various "glimpses" at the slave past and slave subjectivity. In addition, the presence of silences in the narrative structure of *Unconfessed* as acts of "looking sideways" at archival traces produces the novel's distinct representational form. As history forms a valuable component of both novels' representational form, it would be pertinent to consider Hayden White's argument for history as a form of fiction.

#### *1.3.3.1 History as Fiction*

It has long been contended that History can no longer be considered an unadulterated science. As early as the 1970s Hayden White challenged the definitive status of history and produced arguments for the "fictional" quality of the texts historians produce. White discusses the process of writing historiography as follows:

The historian must 'interpret' his data by excluding certain facts from his account as irrelevant to his narrative purpose. On the other hand, in his efforts to reconstruct 'what happened' in any given period of history, the historian inevitably must include in his narrative an account of some event or complex of events for which the facts that would permit plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking. And this means that the historian must 'interpret' his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds. A historical narrative is thus necessarily...at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative. (*Tropics* 51)

Here, White highlights two interconnected points: exclusion and inclusion of data which gesture towards "interpretation" and therefore emphasise the distinct authorial process attached to this kind of writing. Selection, editing, interpretation and narrative perspective are arguably all facets of 'writing' and the position of the author as writer of fiction and writer of history is therefore closely aligned. Philippa Gregory, a writer of historical fiction and author of *The Other Boleyn Girl*, echoes this:

Historians select what story they are going to tell, then they select what facts they are going to use to illustrate and prove this story. They make this selection

on the basis of what they think is most relevant to their subject, and on what is most interesting to themselves. Just because it is factual does not mean it is innocent of artifice. (7)

White emphasises that historiographical writing, much like fiction, necessitates the same constructive engagement. Historians “did not realize that the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them” (*Tropics* 125). Linda Hutcheon reinforces this sentiment by adding that “whether historians deal with seemingly direct information reports and registers or with eye-witness accounts, the fact remains that historians deal with texts which they then process. The denial of this processing leads to a fetishizing of the archive into a stand-in for the past” (“Postmodern Paratextuality” 306).

In the case of historiography, the part cannot stand for the whole as “the presumed concreteness and accessibility of historical milieu, these contexts of the texts that literary scholars study, are themselves products of the fictive capability of the historians who have studied those contexts. The historical documents are not less opaque than the texts studied by the literary critic. Nor is the world those documents figure more accessible. The one is no more ‘given’ than the other” (White, “*Tropics*” 89). Beneficially, Hutcheon argues historiography then “offers a sense of the presence of the past, but this is a past that can only be known from its texts, its traces – be they literary or historical (Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction” 4). Therefore, even if we had complete records of the past in terms of registers, laws, court cases etc., the facts could not “speak for themselves”. Gregory adds that “history is a personal creative craft, not a science; it is an account made by each historian, not a body of facts which exists independently of them. Indeed, there is no such thing as a ‘body’ of accepted facts – it is more like an ‘amorphous flock’ of accepted facts of which the individuals come and go” (9). Therefore both the historian and the novelist can try to recreate an understanding, or interpretation, of these facts, but with the understanding that they will always be doing so from a temporal distance: that they will always be imagining it from the subjective position they inhabit in the present.

#### *1.3.3.2. Historical Fiction*

Historical fiction is a form of writing which lends itself quite effectively to the merging of fact and fiction, and offers certain ways of exploration that the historian is denied. If historiography, or the writing of history, can be considered as undergoing the same authorial process as a work of fiction, or arguably any production of a text, what is the value of historical fiction, and what purpose does it serve? What follows is a brief discussion of the

inherent qualities and functions of historical fiction, in order to ground my argument for the subversive narrative strategies contained in *The Slave Book* and *Unconfessed*.

Philippa Gregory delineates the distinction between the authorial position of the historian and that of the novelist as follows:

The job of the historian is to select the facts, speculate, and then declare the speculation and acknowledge other possibilities. The job of the novelist is to take the facts, speculate, and make such a convincing story-path of the speculation that the reader does not wonder if there was any other route. The novelist cannot allow the reader to escape from the spell of the novel; the reader cannot be allowed to unpick the history from the fiction until the book is closed at the very end of the story. To write a successful novel, the historical fact, the history-based speculation and the pure fiction have to blend. (12)

That is, while the fictional quality of history has been presented above, in her distinction, Gregory highlights the realistic mode of historical fiction and the novelist's seamless blending of fact and fiction. However, this realist mode invites some criticism. De Groot explains that "[m]uch criticism of the historical novel concerns its ability to change fact, and indeed those who attack the form are often concerned with its innate ability to encourage an audience into being knowingly misinformed, misled and duped" (De Groot 6). While this raises "concern for authenticity" (De Groot 6) with regards to historical accuracy, Jonathan Nield provides an emphatic counter-argument:

We know that a few of the leading personages and events have been brought before us in a more or less disjointed fashion, and are perfectly aware that there is room for much discrepancy between the pictures so presented to us (be it with immense skill) and the actual facts as they took place in such and such a year. But, goes on the objector, in the case of a Historical Romance we allow ourselves to be hoodwinked, for, under the influence of a pseudo-historic security, we seem to watch the real sequence of events in so far as these affect the characters in whom we are interested.

(Nield qtd. in De Groot 5)

By implication, the reader of historical fiction is well aware of being "hoodwinked" by the novel and is complicit in this delusion in order to become emotionally immersed in the narrative. What then, does historical fiction offer? As an author of historical fiction, Gregory explains that she finds it "uniquely satisfying to be able to research real characters in the real past and then speculate about their emotions, motives and unconscious desires, which cannot be discovered from the records they left, but have to be imagined" (11). With regards to slave

subjectivity, this is particularly useful as archival records on slave history at the Cape are renowned for being incomplete and sparse. Moreover, as discussed at length in the third chapter, the records largely, if not wholly, omit any presence of a “slave voice”. Historical fiction therefore allows novelist to explore spaces frequently related to subjectivity and consciousness that are generally not included in historiographical accounts. Moreover, as history is often discursively and ideologically produced, historiographical representations run the risk of offering only one kind of representation, if not devolving entirely to stereotype.

In the case of historical representations of slavery, while the archive is limited on the material available on the slave population, the historical representation is accepted and found credible, as it concurs with various other representations already produced, which was “inherent in the intellectual traditions of the culture” (Gqola, “Slaves” 46) that in turn produced the knowledge. Historiography, then, is affected by ideology as its production takes place within a certain ideological framework. White argues,

what was true of ideologies in general was true of historiography specifically, given the fact that history was in no sense a science but was rather a crucial element in every ideology striving to win the title of a science or posing as a ‘realistic’ perspective on both the past and the present. Thus, even those historians who professed no particular ideological commitment and who suppressed the impulse to draw explicit ideological implications from their analysis of past societies could be said to be writing from within a specifiable ideological framework, by virtue of their adoption of a position vis-à-vis the form that historical representation ought to take (White, *Tropics* 69).

In line with White’s argument above on the nature of historiographical production and its inherent ideological quality, Gqola makes a strong argument concerning the ideologically based representations of slaves as occupying the position of the Other in history. She argues that “[r]epresentations of enslaved people in traditional history mirror their physical treatment in colonial slavocratic societies ... Their objectification followed directly from their dehumanisation and these processes jointly ensured the stereotype became the dominant way through which slave reality is read and interpreted by the Oppressor” (“Slaves” 46). To engender the freeing of slave subjectivity from the dominant stereotypical representations that accompany it in history, “the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing” is necessitated.

Gqola reinforces this sentiment, by adding that “history is a fiction which requires constant re-interpretation and revision in order to free the events of the past from the ‘veil of prejudice and illusion that shroud them’” (46). The challenge for authors of historic fiction,

and specifically fiction which deals with subalterns such as slaves, would be to engage with historiography and its prejudiced representations of the marginalised in a manner that contests its inherent ideologies to dispute a representation that would render slave subjects chained to historically subordinate representations. Historical novels are able to “reclaim the past on behalf of a variety of unheard voices” and challenge History “both by the telling of dissident stories and by the positing of alternative realities” (De Groot 140) allowing “the opportunity for novelists to explore and conceptualise identities and otherness throughout the century” (De Groot 67). The approach to history that historical fiction therefore allows is exceptionally useful for the exploration of slave subjectivity and agency, precisely because this avenue is contested in the production of colonial discourse.

How is this kind of representation approached? Gregory explains that “History is a created narrative which tells a story stepping from one agreed fact to another, with gulfs of unknown between each step, bridged only by speculation and imagination” (Gregory 9). It might be useful to consider the facts contained in historiography as dots along a temporal line. These dots represent the numerous examples of historical data that are available to the historian who aims to “connect them” or “fill in the blanks”, using the various techniques of speculation and interpretation as outlined by White, De Groot and Gregory in order to provide a sequential representation of historical accounts. The historical fiction novelist is, however, more concerned with each dot as opposed to the line that connects them. Significantly, this illustration discloses a nuanced reading of “looking sideways” at each fact, or “dot”, as opposed to a linear reading, and allows for an emotive reading in each case. Gregory emphasises that an historical account in its entirety, after all the dots have been connected, “only ever represents the totality of the view of one historian. Someone else, even someone looking at the exact same facts, might read them differently to a different conclusion, or start with a different view” (7). It is my contestation that this alternative approach is taken through an act of looking sideways, imaginatively as opposed to factually, in order to allow for a representation of slave subjectivity that disputes the stereotypical and ideological representations that precede it, while remaining historically accurate.

#### *1.3.3.3. Modes of Emplotment*

What I have sought to establish is the constructed nature of both historiography and historical fiction and the ability of the latter to engage with subjectivity that is occluded by historiographical representation. As both novels draw extensively on historiography and the archive for background to their plots, it would be salient to consider the different modes of



emplotment that are employed by historians, and which influence writers of historical fiction, as identified by White.

White emphasises that “the historian’s imagination must strain in two directions simultaneously: critically, in such a way as to permit him to decide what can be left out of an account (though he cannot invent or add to the facts known); and poetically, in such a way as to depict vitality and individuality, the medley of events as if they were present to the sight of the reader” (*Metahistory* 92, emphasis in original). To return to an earlier point, the historian therefore strives, in his emplotment of data, to capture the essence of the kind of story he tells. To White, historical emplotment is a “move from the consideration of history as an object, a content ... to that in which the form provided, the narrative actually produced, is a content” (*Metahistory* 93). Drawing on Hegel, White argues that this is achieved through a fitting mode of emplotment or representation, and falls into four modes: romance, tragedy, comedy and satire. It is my contestation that *The Slave Book* and *Unconfessed* can be read to fall within the “romance” and “tragedy” emplotments respectively.

White defines romance emplotment as a representation which emphasises the “objective and subjective expression” (*Metahistory* 88). As explored in Chapter Two, the narrative structure of *The Slave Book* constitutes a juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces, in which the objective positions of the slave characters are placed antithetically to an interior exploration of their subjectivity. Through analysing *The Slave Book* as a reflexive exemplification of the romance mode of emplotment, I explore the technique as a valuable approach towards, and elucidation of, slave subjectivity. Following White, the tragedy mode, which “stresses the irreconcilable element of human affairs, and laments the loss of the good necessarily entailed when values collide” (*Metahistory* 95) becomes evident in *Unconfessed*. When compared to the romance mode which “celebrates the triumph of the good after trials and tribulations” (White, *Metahistory* 95) the different authorial stance Christiansē takes to Jacobs’s representation of the historical period of the Cape Colony and the slavocratic institution, thus becomes clear.

The novels, though both of equal gravity and significance in the temporal understanding of history and the acceptance of the subjectivity of the marginalised characters of the slaves in the Cape Colony, adopt very different vantage points in order to achieve the end of filling in the lacunae left by the archive. This thesis assimilates and explicates these perspectives, and in doing so reconciles and contrasts the works.



## CHAPTER 2

### RAYDA JACOBS'S *THE SLAVE BOOK*: HISTORICAL FICTION AND THE ROMANTIC "GLIMPSE"

*A book of historical fiction is an arrogant attempt by a writer in a few hundred pages to recreate and inform. The best you can hope for is a glimpse, and trust that the glimpse will open a much larger window in your mind. I couldn't possibly speak on behalf of those early people, and don't pretend to know what it was like.*

- Rayda Jacobs (*The Slave Book*, Introduction)

Rewriting the historical past and addressing this temporal space from the present is a complicated venture. "The past really did exist," argues Hutcheon, "but we can only 'know' that past today through its texts, and therein lies its connections to the literary" ("Historiographic Metafiction" 10). While the past is rendered available to us in the plethora of information lodged in the archive, produced in historiography and represented in historical fiction – to name but a few – it is always from a distant and detached position, simply because it has passed. As Jerome de Groot comments: "History is other, and the present familiar" (3). This poses a myriad of questions. *What* is accessible to us? *How* do we access this? And how do we render the inaccessible accessible? As a work of historical fiction, Rayda Jacobs's romance novel *The Slave Book* elicits such questions.

*The Slave Book* is set against the backdrop of the abolition of the Slave Act in 1834 and the subsequent four-year period of forced apprenticeship. It tells the story of Sangora Salamah, a Mohametan slave from Java, his wife Noria, and her daughter Somiela. At the novel's commencement, Sangora and Somiela are sold to Andries de Villiers at a slave auction and as a result are separated from Noria, who is purchased by an English doctor residing in town. The novel details the lives of Somiela and Sangora and their stay on De Villiers's farm Zoetewater, where Somiela meets and falls in love with Harman Kloot, the "voorman" (overseer) and brother of De Villiers's son-in-law, Marthinus. The slave story is told through the prism of romance, as the bulk of the narrative is centred around the development of Somiela's and Harman's relationship which is considered taboo, since Somiela is a slave and Harman a white "vry-burger" (freeman), and therefore against slavocratic and colonial convention. The specific interest of this chapter is situated in the novel's romantic rendering of a historical period which, at its time of publication, had been under-represented and under-documented in literature.

Given the limited literary engagement with historical records on the period of slavery at the Cape, as discussed in the previous chapter, one significant aspect to consider in relation to the text is its dependence on historiography. Arguably, the key impetus behind works of historical fiction is the facts or history they contain and draw on.

The Cape Archive, and subsequent historiography, is one of the few depositories of historical information available on slavery in South Africa and assumedly contains the information that led to the “glimpse” of which Jacobs speaks. Maria Olaussen comments that “[t]he colonial archive is present in *The Slave Book* both in a direct sense in its use of historical sources and archival material and in a more indirect way through the romance structure of the narrative” (37). That is, the direct presence of the archive is located in the opening of each chapter with an epilogue consisting of a historiographical quote in direct relation to the historical moment that the narration addresses. Indirectly, archival and historical knowledge is presented through narrative constituents such as dialogue and focalisation. It is useful here to observe Hayden White’s discussion of Hegel’s argument for four different archetypes used by historians in their emplotment of history: romance, comedy, tragedy and satire. To Hegel, the romance mode of historical emplotment is used in order to convey objective and subjective expression. In White’s development of Hegel’s argument (and as discussed in the previous chapter), there exists the implicit suggestion that there is no great ontological divide between an author’s writing as novelist, and that of the historian. Jacobs’s use of the romance structure as her narrative strategy is effectively employed in a juxtaposition of external (the historic) and internal (the subjective) spaces. I will argue that this contrast in spaces allows for instances of subversion from without and subversion from within the slave system to become apparent in the novel.

This chapter therefore opens with a discussion of the “glimpse” as conveyed by the romance mode of emplotment present in *The Slave Book*. Consequently, I move to a textual analysis of *The Slave Book* and explore the various “glances” inherent in Jacobs’s utilisation of a narrative structure that explores agency and subjectivity and sketches spaces in which slaves are allowed to speak despite discursive silencing and subordination. Drawing on the extensive work done by Gabeba Baderoon on the resilient presence of specifically “Malay”, or Muslim, slaves in South African texts, I explore spaces that allow for an independent slave culture, and therefore an identity independent of discursive subordination, to exist in line with its utilization on Jacobs’s part as a register for resistance to subjugation. These spaces include occasions where the narrative allows for representations of agency, frequently related to

intimacy, the kitchen, or other spheres related to the art of cooking or food, as well as Muslim practices of religion.

## 2.1 Historical Romance Fiction as Narrative Strategy

*Historical fiction ... provides a space for political intervention and reclamation; for innovation and destabilisation. [It] can report from places made marginal and present a dissident or dissenting account of the past. - De Groot (The Historical Novel, 140)*

As a work of historical romance fiction, *The Slave Book* presents a narrative which frequently explores the representation of imagined intimate spaces relating to slave subjectivity. The text conveys these representations as “glimpses” at the slave past and attempt to humanise its respective slave characters. In relation, the narrative’s romance emplotment is intrinsically linked to Jacobs’s methodology of “glimpsing” as the representational form lends itself to a frequent depiction of interiority through focalisation, and is therefore able to establish such moments of intimacy within its larger historical context.

### 2.1.1 The “Glimpse”

In the light of the argument concerning the analytical “glimpse” with which I approach *The Slave Book*, it would be prudent to consider Pumla Gqola’s work on slave memory and more specifically, her concept of “re-memory” or “re-membering”. Gqola posits the distinct difference between “remembering” and “re-membering” as the latter constituting a conscious, constructive revisiting of the past as opposed to an involuntary unmediated response. Furthermore, helix-like in structure, “re-membering” constitutes a constant revisiting of the past as it induces structural change to the conceptualisation of the past, and therefore the present. “Re-membering” also points towards a consciousness of the inherent ideological nature in historical representation and is therefore of essential use in its approach to engagement with history and the past.

Explicitly framed as “historical fiction” in its introduction, *The Slave Book* interweaves an abundance of factual information into its fictional plot which serves to ground the novel firmly within its Cape slave context, while the narrative mode explores imagined slave subjectivity. In my reading, *The Slave Book* presents itself as an attempt on Jacobs’s part to explore and engage the issue of slave subjectivity through its romance mode. The concept of “re-membering” is present in the novel’s narrative structure as “glimpses” of the

characters' imagined experience and interiority reveal engagement on the author's part with discursive constraints. I argue that Jacobs's novel is therefore closely concerned with a factually accurate account of the lives these slaves at the Cape had to lead, an attempt on the one hand to provide insight into the violent and oppressed history of these oppressed people and on the other, to present their interiority and humanity in relation to this.

Jacobs's narrative strategy of romance fiction exemplifies practices of historical fiction which Fernando Rosa Ribeiro describes as thinking "creatively about nation, colonialism, and identity, as well as the intimate sphere, in ways that [are] exploratory and tentative, but also potentially novel and even subversive" (104). On Jacobs's part, this strategy proffers representations that, while alluding to the historical facts upon which they are based, simultaneously offer instances of subversion within the blanket of discursive context.

My enquiry into the exploration of slave subjectivity is framed by Jacobs's statement that *The Slave Book* in its narrative entirety is "a mere glimpse" at the imagined lives of the slaves at the Cape. She explains that as a writer one can only hope that a "glimpse" inspires larger windows in one's mind, as a full and coherent portrayal of the past is impossible. The novel uses a variety of "glimpses" to invoke imagined slave experiences.

Consequently, in my analysis of the novel's narrative strategy, the romance structure of *The Slave Book* is significant. In the light of Gqola's argument that "one of the most pervasive ways in which slaves were objectified in the discourses which supported and maintained this insidious institution is through a representation of slaves as a singular undifferentiated mass" ("Slaves" 46), I will contend that the novel establishes its romance mode precisely because it allows for a focus on the individual experiences of its slave protagonist to be read within this representation through these "glimpses". Moreover, the central romance plot of Somiela's and Harman's relationship furthers this differentiation from the masses as it "constitutes the active social consciousness" that Ndebele identifies in his argument for "the ordinary" (55): that is, a portrayal of the individual's sense of his place in the world. Due to the apparent racial inequality in their relationship, as Somiela is a slave and Harman a white man, the union is met with much resistance and distaste by slaves and slave owners alike. Against the background of slavocracy, the gist of the plot then traces the development and difficulties of their relationship. This in turn allows for other instances in the novel where subjectivity and agency are engaged, especially through the presentation of the narrative with slave characters as focalisers and, more specifically, as thinking subjects. In turn, this allows characters like Somiela and Sangora to deflect some of the attempts at defining them as purely subordinate, and therefore Other.

### 2.1.2 Interiority and Narration

*The Slave Book* opens with a mysterious retrospective first-person narrator, who is later revealed to be Sangora, reflecting on the day slaves were granted their freedom:

It rained that first day in 1838. Just a light drizzle, a weepy day. People said it was God crying. Ashamed of what we'd become. I remember it as if it was yesterday. The slaves had prayed and waited for it, and when January first arrived, most of them had nowhere to go. Some even begged to stay on with the masters who'd maimed them. (Jacobs 12)

This excerpt, printed in italics in the novel, performs an introductory function to the plot. The novel concludes with a similarly self-conscious narrative, also presented in italics, indicating to the reader that the bulk of the intervening narrative, as told by an omniscient third-person narrator, draws on Sangora's experiences. Following Olaussen's comment that "[w]hen placed within the context of American slave narratives and their use within the abolitionist movement, the question of the narrator in a novel about slavery becomes significant" (37), Sangora's status as slave is fundamental to his function as narrator and focalisor. As noted by Christiansë, South African slave narratives are largely absent from historiography and the archive, "due to factors such as slave illiteracy and the control of the printing press by the colonial office". She points out that this remained the case until the nineteenth century, "[so] that there was no chance for slaves to develop a literary voice, a written voice" (Christiansë in Smiley). Jacobs's use of slave focalisors can therefore be read as a conscious act on the part of the author to attribute a voice to those who were denied personal narratives by colonialism. Moreover, as "[m]ost histories are written in third-person past tense with a concealed narrator..." (Gregory 8), the inclusion of the omniscient third-person narrator in Jacobs's novel, whose nature is similar to the narrative voice employed in written histories, serves as an ironic subversion. The frequent shifts in focalisation to free-indirect discourse in which the third-person narrator's speech echoes the language used by the focalising slave characters, allow the author to convey "glimpses" into the interiority of the slaves and imputes agency to them.

This form of agency is assimilable in the argument James C Scott outlines in his extensive work on peasant resistance, *Weapons of the Weak*. Here, Scott investigates sites of active resistance by groups of subordinate people, and explains how they are able to find instances of agency in acts of what he defines as "everyday resistance", despite being rendered as marginal and oppressed. To Scott, these kinds of resistance are contrary to

popular misconceptions that resistance necessarily entails force and violence. Alternatively, he argues that within discursive subordination, subtle if not “silent” revolts are the most effective as they do not draw attention and therefore go unnoticed by the masters. These acts of resistance are frequently of an interior nature as opposed to exterior expressions of force. Scott explains that

Gramsci is ... misled when he claims that the radicalism of subordinate classes is to be found more in their acts than in their beliefs. It is more nearly the reverse. The realm of behaviour – particularly in power-laden situations – is precisely where dominated classes are most constrained. And it is at the level of beliefs and interpretations – where they can safely be ventured – that subordinate classes are least trammelled. (322)

Rachel, the oldest slave on Zoetewater, frequently instructs the others that “slaves don’t have opinions” (Jacobs 33) and “slaves don’t have the luxury of promises” (Jacobs 67). While it is possible to read general statements like these as a collective grouping of all slaves under one term, and thereby to impose the representation on them as an “undifferentiated mass”, her claims can be read to convey an ironic subversion. They are seemingly in line with De Villiers’s statement that “no slave is ever content” (Jacobs 106) and therefore they constantly complain, and are possibly unruly. This would further serve to justify the necessity for their control and containment, and the perpetuation of colonial ideology. The hegemony inherent in Rachel’s statements can be considered evident as well, as it presents slaves as voiceless entities.

While Rachel can indubitably be held culpable for this kind of representation – as she instructs Somiela and Sangora on how to behave, and therefore get by and survive without being severely punished – it simultaneously speaks of inherent awareness and interpretation. Her statements, along with those of De Villiers, reveal the hegemonic and therefore indoctrinating nature of colonial thinking about slavery: that slaves cannot form opinions, that they have no foot to stand on, and are ungrateful complaining nuisances. The irony lies in her ability to formulate them as advice for survival. In other words, while Rachel’s commentary, as a slave, gestures towards the hegemonic effect of colonial ideology, her words simultaneously indicate an awareness of its workings and present Rachel as a thinking subject; one who is aware of circumstantial dynamics, the discourse in which she exists and the repercussions her actions have within it. Moreover, she would be unable to make utterances relating to such matters had she not had some considerable experience of them. The inclusion of her statements, then, indicates an analysis, and accordingly an appraisal, of her

circumstances. Coming from the mouth of the slave, Rachel's words simultaneously indicate hegemony and its subversion, permeated by a measure of agency.

Other interiorities are equally revealing. Through Harman as focaliser, we are presented with descriptions of the slaves, which emphasise various individual qualities that are juxtaposed with the prejudice expressed by De Villiers's statement above. We are told that

[t]heir keepers knew little of about who their slaves were. The De Villiers family knew Sangora was a carpenter and could read and write. They didn't know that he came from a line of caliphs and sheikhs and had a high religious background. They knew Salie had woodworking skills. They didn't know he was also a tailor, and made men's vests in his spare time, which Arend sold in town on market day. They didn't know Hannibal could draw – well enough to get himself work as a sketcher of human events. (Jacobs 110)

Similarly, the novel opens with Sangora's reflection revealing an equal representation of the slaves as individual and therefore human:

This drawing here, it's faded now. Hannibal did it. He could look at something, then put it to paper from memory. He had a good hand and was always looking for paper or cloth or stone. No one knew he had this talent. They didn't know anything. They didn't know Salie could sew. They didn't know I could read. But there was a tailor, an interpreter, a painter, a yellow-skinned Sonqua who could pick up the spoor of the devil. (Jacobs 12)

The families' ignorance of the slaves' abilities and particular skills is thus oppositional to the description of the slaves as people with human qualities and talents. Their subjectivity is emphasised through their presentation as being three-dimensional characters with hobbies and interests, skills they have acquired and practiced.

### 2.1.3 Romance Emplotment

In the previous chapter I explicated the similarities and differences between historical fiction and historiography. I have argued that historiography is in its essence a mediation of the past in textual and thus literary form. The historian's position as author is no different to that of the novelist for each chooses in his or her understanding of their subject matter, formal and stylistic elements with which to convey narrative and meaning. White argues emphatically for an *interpretation* of historical facts, which in turn leads to a selection of an adequate mode of emplotment for those whose "status as possible models of historical representation or conceptualization" is dependent on the "poetic nature of [the historian's] perspectives on



history and its processes" (White, *Metahistory* 4) rather than the "data" itself. That is, the model of historical representation depends on that which the historian wishes to convey and the manner in which he chooses to do so in order to emphasise, in his emplotment, his story "as a story of a specific kind" (White, *Metahistory* 12). I have emphasised the romance mode as one of these models and its close similarity to the method of emplotment used by romance novelists.

I read the presence of the romance mode in *The Slave Book* as serving two purposes. White defines romance emplotment as a representation which emphasises the "objective and subjective expression" (*Metahistory* 88). If, as I have argued, historical fiction is a form of writing which lends itself quite effectively to the merging of fact and fiction, and offers certain ways of exploration, such as subjectivity, which the historian is denied, where the romance structure in the novel facilitates this undertaking. To this end, the narrative structure of *The Slave Book* constitutes a juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces, in which the objective position of the slave characters are placed antithetically to an interior exploration of their subjectivity. Secondly, when placed within the slavocratic context of Jacobs's novel, the romance mode, which traces an individual's transgression of oppressive social and moral experiences to liberation from it (albeit in various degrees), becomes significant. *The Slave Book*, with Somiela as protagonist, accurately follows a similar narrative emplotment as the reader is presented with her problematic portrayal as slave within the Cape Colonial world and the transgression of context-specific obstacles, culminating in her marriage to Harman.

Jacobs romanticises historiography in two different ways. The first is conveyed in the inclusion of quotes from archival and historical documents as epigraphs to each chapter, which in turn relate directly to the narrative content of the specific chapter. An example of this is a chapter that opens with a quotation from the Khoi rebel leader Klaas Stuurman Barrow:

Restore the country of which our forefathers were despoiled by the Dutch and we have nothing more to ask ... We have lived very contentedly ... before these Dutch plunderers molested us, and why should we not do so again if left to ourselves? Has not the Groot Baas given plenty of grass-roots, and berries and grasshoppers for our use; and, till the Dutch destroyed them, abundance of wild animals to hunt? And will they not return and multiply when these destroyers are gone? (Jacobs 40)

This quotation is taken from the second volume of John Barrow's *Travels into the Interior of Southern Africa*, an extensive account of the experiences of the Dutch Colonial settlers on



their excursions into the South African interior between 1797 and 1798 with a detailed history and topographical survey of the native tribes, plantation, minerals and animal life they encountered. Jacobs follows this with the fictional account of Harman Kloot's resistance as rebel leader of a Sonqua group, an act which caused him to wound a Dutch farmer and seek refuge from the ensuing prosecution at Zoetewater. The authentic historical data is therefore juxtaposed with a fictional and romanticised portrayal of the same historical context, which in turn provides a more profound exploration of (historically stimulated) subjectivity.

Elsewhere in the novel an epigraph containing a quote from Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, pronounces that

... the master, however independent he may have wished to be of his slave, needed his community to both confirm and support his power. The community, through its agents, wanted this support reciprocated if only to safeguard the interests of its members ... the relationship between the master and his community was never a static one. The master wanted to influence public attitudes and deflect attempts to interfere with his proprietary claims on his slaves. (Jacobs 88)

Accordingly, Jacobs follows this with narrative detail concerning the Protector of Slaves, and an incident wherein Harman makes inquiries on behalf of Sangora as to the whereabouts of Noria. He ultimately makes contact with her, and in turn offers to return a keepsake of Noria's to Somiela. Here, the narrative function responds to the factual information preceding it in the epigraph, communicating the fragile and variable nature of the master/slave power relationship to which Patterson refers. Harman's willingness to run a personal errand on the slaves' behalf undermines De Villiers's autonomy and destabilizes the master/servant dichotomy for, albeit ever so slightly, it places him in allegiance with the slaves and therefore resists the confirmation and support of power by the "community" that was requisite to the master. Moreover, it is suggested that this act of kindness is the germ of the resulting romance between Harman and Somiela. Despite Harman's inability to articulate the motive behind performing the favour, Noria reflects that "she could see far. Her instincts were never wrong. Harman Kloot had come all the way from the Wynberg to bring her a message. People didn't do things like that just for nothing, especially not for slaves" (Jacobs 92).

In due course Harman concedes that he "didn't know what the end was, but admitted to himself that the slave girl had something to do with it" (Jacobs 93). Elsewhere, in the same chapter, we are told that

[t]he last ten years had seen a series of changes giving slaves increased protection under the law...The appointment of a Protector of Slaves was

perhaps the hardest thing to accept: for many farmers this was tantamount to appointing an outsider to interfere in their affairs. Slaves could lodge complaints with this Protector who was then obliged to investigate and represent them in criminal actions against their masters. The present government wanted to promote stable family units by allowing slaves to marry and by forbidding the sale in separate lots of husbands, wives, and children under the age of ten. Slaves could also not be compelled to work on Sundays except for domestic work and work of necessity...Then there was the matter of Sangora's leg irons – something which was blatantly against the law. (Jacobs 89)

Harman's focalisation provides a fictionalised and subjective expression of the context to the historical information contained in the epigraph. The intrusion of a Protector of Slaves into the slavocratic community of the Cape Colony threatened to undermine and disrupt the autonomous power of the slave master and thereby his proprietary claims on his slaves. Consistent with White's definition of romance emplotment, each chapter follows this narrative trend and conveys the juxtaposition of the objective historical expression with the subjective portrayal of the factual information.

Significantly, the aforementioned excerpt conveys a second form of subjective expression present in the indirect presence of the archive. Jacobs attempts to blur historical data into the narrative direction of her novel, and portrays instances where characters focalise historical and factual information either in moments of interior reflection or dialogue. Andries de Villiers's reflections are indicative of this, as he ruminates:

[h]is prize negro, Kananga, captured by a Portuguese slaver off the coast of Mozambique, was an excellent mandoor. Prize negroes were introduced into the Cape after British involvement in the slave trade ceased in 1808. Although not technically slaves according to official documents, prize negroes belonged to the category of 'slave' rather than 'free', and had to serve a fourteen-year apprenticeship. Seized as slaves by the British naval squadron from the ships of other nations, they were to be liberated and bound to prudent masters and mistresses to learn trades or handicrafts so that they could gain their livelihood when their apprenticeships expired. (Jacobs 15)

Information of a historical and factual nature is thus presented to the reader by being incorporated into the natural flow of the narrative, and indirectly communicates information pertaining to the historical context and happenings that form the background of the novel.

### 2.1.4 The Romance

As mentioned, an evocative aspect of the narrative, and the one which Jacobs presents as being the most subversive, is the love affair between Somiela and Harman. Their relationship is problematised by numerous factors, the most evident being their racial difference. As Harman is descendant from a family of white farmers, the Kloots from the Karoo, and Somiela is a “half-breed”, the product of a slave mother and a European father, their relationship is considered taboo not only in the eyes of the de Villiers family, but also in the community and society at large.<sup>14</sup> As Gqola has argued, constructions of racial identity depends upon clear bodily markers of race, which is why Somiela’s light-skinned beauty is so threatening to the white women on the farm. Furthermore, in order for the master/servant dynamic to stay intact, the slaves need to remain “othered”, and a relationship between a slave on the farm and the foreman, a person in a position of power, would inadvertently soften the boundaries of this dynamic. Additionally, Harman’s brother, Marthinus is marrying De Villiers’s daughter: he therefore occupies both a professional position on the farm as “voorman” and is related to the family as well, making his relationship with Somiela all the more threatening to the slavocracy.

The impact their relationship has on transcending prejudice and taboo is based on the fact that the two characters connect on an emotional level, as they fall in love. The romance plot emphasises Somiela’s interiority, which escapes works of historiography and is erased in and by the archive. Gregory explains that “[f]ar more than the historian, the novelist is concerned with extraneous detail: costume, saddler, food, hobbies, weather. The novelist is also concerned with the inner life: secrets and the unconscious” (12). This is evident in *The Slave Book*. The taboo nature of the attraction between Somiela and Harman causes each character considerable internal conflict which, in turn, depicts Somiela’s internal dialogue on the matter, granting her an intrinsic agency. When Harman promises to take her on a trip to Cape Town to visit Noria, her mother, Somiela wonders:

Why was he really doing it? Was it out of concern for a miserable slave? He was good natured, they said, but was it really just a good heart, or was there something he was looking for in return? Dare she think it? That he might have just the slightest interest in her? That question went round and round in her head. He couldn’t just be taking her to her mother out of the goodness of his heart. But what exactly was it that he wanted? (Jacobs 115).

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<sup>14</sup>However, as the novel later reveals Harman, too, is a “half-breed” as his mother is of Sonqua heritage, emphasis is placed on “white” being a social construct, rather than a biological one.

The narration here can be read as reflective of the argument Ndebele makes for rediscovering the ordinary as a mode of subversion within the representation of oppressive states. Ndebele posits descriptions of “thinking” and “subtlety” as primary to those conveying “seeing” and “obviousness” (Ndebele 46) and argues that representations conveying marginal or subordinate characters as thinking subjects, reclaim agency on their behalf. He explains that “the ordinary is sobering rationality. It is the forcing of attention on necessary detail” (53) and therefore indicative of a character’s ability to appraise and analyse situations and contexts, and act accordingly. Moreover, in his argument for rediscovering the ordinary, Ndebele maintains that the writer must present the reader with “an honest rendering of the subjectivity of his character” (55). Somiela’s reflection and analysis of Harman’s intentions towards her and his subsequent feelings are indicative of the elements of the ordinary that Ndebele discusses.

The prohibited nature of Somiela and Harman’s relationship functions as a catalyst for the revelation of other slaves’ interiority as well. After Harman offers to take Somiela to meet her mother, and a moment of emotional intimacy passes between them in the kitchen, Rachel enters and

immediately sensed that something had happened. She looked from one to the other, but nothing seemed out of place. Somiela was at the working table slicing bread, Harman concentrated on the food on his plate. It was all too contained. She knew something has passed between them. The girl was too attractive for her own good. Harman Kloot was easy to like, but one still had to remember who he was. (Jacobs 114)

It is clear in instances such as these that Jacobs uses the romance plot and its forbidden nature as stimulus to establish moments of interiority for the slave characters and to portray them as volitional subjects.

The incorporation of the romance in the novel further transcends the subjugating position that slaves were forced to occupy primarily due to their status as chattel slaves: Somiela’s and Harman’s love allow them to acknowledge the human qualities in each other, thereby affirming the validity of these qualities in both of them. This is noteworthy specifically as it is enacted towards the slave, which was prohibited by the authorities at the Cape. While (often coercive) sexual relations between slave women and freemen or slave owners were common (as with Somiela’s mother), and even marriages between manumitted slaves and their owners, what is subversive here is a *love* affair carried out *within* the institution of slavery between a slave woman and free man. Social beliefs dictated that slaves were considered of lesser human nature than white people, making it impossible to relate to

them on a basic human level. More so, the institution itself was dependent on the practice of objectifying people as possessions and commodities and thus their subversion to become subjects, subverts the institutional convention as well.

Olaussen posits the mutually consensual sexual relationship between Somiela and Harman as empowering:

Assimilation in the Indian Ocean World was a gendered process where freedom for enslaved women thus often meant inclusion into a patriarchal household where all women and children held positions of subordination. In this respect, the question of how to represent freedom and independence for enslaved women becomes deeply entangled with issues of sexual self-determination and sexual abuse. Speaking from the position of descendants of slaves, the question of how enslaved women related to their children and how these children were conceived is unavoidable and often represented in a stark binary between rape and romantic love. Both *Kites of Good Fortune* and *The Slave Book* contain brief references to the sexual abuse suffered by the mothers of the female protagonists, but represent the protagonists themselves as active sexual agents in relation to their white lovers. (41)

In comparison to the sexual exploitation female slaves were frequently subjected to by their white masters, a consensual relationship imbues the slave woman with agency as it is a relationship of her choosing. While Somiela is never raped or forced into sexual acts, she is still vulnerable to a sexual gaze from the white men on the farm. After purchasing her at the auction De Villiers wonders whether “his true motive for making the purchase [had] been so the girl could help in the kitchen, or to increase the slave population on his farm?” (Jacobs 23). Later on in the novel, Somiela narrowly escapes being sexually molested by De Villiers when he asks her to bathe him. Jacobs juxtaposes De Villiers’s encryption of Somiela as a sexualised object through her employment of the romance plot in the novel. She emphasises Somiela’s conscious act of entering into a relationship with Harman, and thereby awards her agency and ownership over her body, broaching the issue of self-ownership versus ownership by others.

Furthermore, the firm historical background against which the novel is set is the basis for the unsettling nature of the narrative, as, the more factually and historically correct the basis on which the novel rests, the more defiant and risky Somiela and Harman’s relationship seems, and therefore the more subversively it reads. The character of Andries de Villiers also adds to the equation. His unfair, malicious and prejudiced character is a necessity to accentuate and draw attention to Somiela and Harman’s relationship.

Jacobs attempts to attribute a transcendental quality to their relationship that is intended to triumph over prejudice and discrimination by allowing two characters to fall in love across opposing racial and colour barriers, yet it is ultimately encumbered by her own narrative devices. While Somiela's and Harman's relationship is deemed risky and taboo because Harman is not only socially constructed as "white" and a "free man", but also related through siblings to the family of the slave with whom he is in love, at the end of the novel he discovers his own mixed roots. Harman's ancestry is shown to be of mixed heritage, like Somiela's, which troubles the meaning of the romance.

I find that Harman's status as "mixed" hinders the transcendence that Somiela's and Harman's relationship is supposed to portray in the novel. The fact that both Somiela and Harman are cast as "mixed", and therefore of equal social status, problematises the triumph their union supposedly enjoys over the prejudice and oppression of society through negating their separating factors, and renders the feat of their relationship of lesser value. While their union highlights the social construction of race, which, even though constructed, exerts a genuine social force on the dynamic of the slavocratic institution, their relationship is made slightly more acceptable as a result of Harman's own "mixed" heritage. This is entrenched even further through their marriage being made more plausible and socially agreeable when Harman converts to Islam in order to marry Somiela. A factor that further aggravates this undercutting of the transcendent nature of Somiela's and Harman's relationship, is Harman's death, after which Somiela marries one of her own kind, a former Mohametan slave. These narrative choices work against the controversial and contrastive diegesis, specifically of the taboo love affair, undermining the unlikely but victorious love between slave and free man, and locating it instead between two people of similar class. The glorious transcendence offered through the depiction of their love, and its divergence from what is expected by society, is diminished when the reader discovers that Harman and Somiela are in fact not so different. Despite this reduction being counterintuitive in the romance mode in which it is written, it also serves to enhance the reader's understanding of the slaves' absolute loss of agency; even as Somiela is written as a nonpareil of the slave race, she is being constricted and confined within the narrative, to marry another Muslim slave. The unexpected departure from the predictable "happy ending" is thus both problematising and poignant.

## **2.2 Subversion from Without: The Application of Statute**

*The fact is, however, that all of the "routine" and historically common patterns of social subordination and exploitation – slavery, serfdom, sharecropping, or even wage labour – are*

*unlike the concentration camp in that their “victims” retain considerable autonomy to construct a life and culture not entirely controlled by the dominant class. In other words there are, for each of these groups, situations in which the mask of obsequiousness, defence, and symbolic compliance may be lifted. This realm of relatively “safe” discourse, however narrow, is a necessary condition for the development of symbolic resistance – a social space in which the definitions and performances imposed by domination do not prevail.*

*- Scott (Weapons of the Weak, 328)*

Rayda Jacobs's *The Slave Book* derives its title from the archival register that stipulated the rules and regulations controlling the social behaviour of slaves at the Cape of Good Hope during its period of slavocracy. Worden describes the nature of the document as follows:

In addition to the criminal law which applied to freemen, [the slave] was also subject to a series of regulations passed in the Company period to maintain strict control over the slave population. The most notable of summary of these is the ‘slave code’ passed under Governor Tulbagh in 1754, which controlled the meeting of slaves in groups, especially in the potentially dangerous circumstances of Cape Town streets, taverns or in rural districts on holidays. The clearest indication of the role of the law in relation to the position of slave and master was that article of the code which stated that any slave who should ‘culminate, affront or treat his master with despise, or accuse him falsely with any disgraceful act should be scourged, put in irons or punished according to the circumstances of the case’, and that a slave who ‘laid hands upon his master or mistress, with or without a weapon, should be punished by death’. (“Slavery” 115)

As a work of historical fiction, *The Slave Book* opens with an abundance of factual information presented to the reader before he/she is immersed in the actual narrative. In fact, the very first thing the reader is presented with is a copy of the Tulbagh Slave code of 1754 laying out certain rules and regulations which slaves were expected to obey:

#### Slaves

are to be indoors after 10pm or carry lanterns,

are not to ride horses or wagons in streets

are not to sing, whistle or make any other sound at night

are not to meet in bars, buy alcohol, or form groups, on public holidays



are not to gather near the entrance of a church during church services  
are not to stop in the street to talk to other slaves  
who insulted or falsely accused a freeman, would be flogged  
who struck a slaveholder – put to death  
are not permitted to own or to carry guns  
Free blacks aren't equal to free white burghers  
Freed slave women are not to wear coloured silk or hoop skirts, fine lace, or  
any decoration on their hats, or earrings made of gems or imitation gems.  
(Jacobs 11)

Notably, Jacobs's version differs from the historical account Worden provides. This version is a summary of these regulations and doesn't replicate the actual historical document, as described by Worden. In keeping with her "scratch at the surface" approach to historical representation, Jacobs merges fact and fiction. The insertion of this "document" at the start of her narrative functions as a blueprint to the "glimpses" she provides, as most of the rules mentioned in her version of the Slave Code appear as a particular climactic event in the novel. Situating this document right at the beginning of the novel predetermines an understanding of slaves as a "singular, undifferentiated mass", which Jacobs establishes in order to accent the individualism and subjectivity of her slave protagonists. The Slave Code is headed by the collective indefinite term "slaves", and therefore addresses all slaves as one entity with no differentiation between them. The general application of this term, in turn, implies that all slaves will adhere to its declaration, with no measure of agency awarded in relation to the master/servant dynamic it carries. The establishment of this discursive ideology is important to the novel's narrative technique. As Elleke Boehmer comments, representations of the Other as "dumb and inarticulate" (qtd. in Gqola, "Slaves" 46), which focuses on the body and therefore occludes the presence of cognitive function, were imperative in the perpetuation of colonial discourse:

[f]or what is body and instinctual is by definition dumb and inarticulate. As it does not itself signify, or signify coherently, it may be freely occupied, scrutinized, analyzed, resignified. This representation carries complete authority; the Other cannot gainsay it. (Boehmer qtd. in Gqola, "Slaves" 46)

Therefore any notion of a singular or individual identity is removed, and slaves are reduced to common objects with no differentiating features, and thus no accordant individual agency. Significantly, each rule stipulated in the document is echoed in a correlating instance in the novel. I argue that this is a conscious technique offering a subversion of each rule and thereby a divergence from traditional depictions of slave subjectivity as argued above. Moreover, by

pre-empting the narrative with this kind of representation, Jacobs shows that these blanket rules were applied to a range of people whom we come to know as individuals. Therefore the narrative strategy inherent in the novel relies on the initial establishment of historical context and ideology which is mirrored in Jacobs's fictional plot and juxtaposed with explorations of subjectivity and agency within these similar circumstances.

One of the rules in the novel's Tulbagh Slave Code stipulates that freed slave women are not to wear colourful garments or accessories or imitation gems. According to Patterson, this rule was passed as "jealous white women decided that freed women, by their dress and manner, had become 'unseemly and vexing to the public'" (256). This was done in society clearly to demarcate clearly between slave and European, despite the former's status as free. Congruently, upon Somiela's arrival at Zoetewater, she is ordered by her mistress to remove bangles from her wrists and the silk from the dress she is wearing. The resonance apparent between this segment in the novel and the stipulation in the last rule of the Slave Code that "[f]reed slave women are not to wear coloured silk or hoop skirts, fine lace, or any decoration on their hats, or earrings made of gems or imitation gems" is very clear, and also striking.

This action is heightened in the narrative to act as a means of differentiation between mistress and slave and therefore epitomises ownership, identifying the accessories as symbols of individualism and agency. The removal of Somiela's bangles and lace is an attempt by Marieta, the wife of Andries de Villiers, not only to distance herself and other European women from "unsightly" slave women, but also works to assimilate Somiela into the "undifferentiated mass". Removing her accessories removes her individuality and agency; the removal of the bangles become symbolic of Somiela's enslavement on Zoetewater and a further submergence into the discourse of slavery. Before removing the bangles Somiela reflects that

the four delicate bangles carved out of yellowwood had been given to her by Sangora when she was ten years old. Sangora had been with her mother a few years by then. She liked the dull sound the bangles made when they swung on her arms and she had never taken them off before ... Her arms would feel naked without them. (Jacobs 26)

Inasmuch as Somiela's bangles set her apart from the other slaves and therefore the "undifferentiated mass", the bangles are also something which belong to her and form part of her identity, one that precludes existence as a slave. Patterson explains that "slavery must be seen as a process involving several transitional phases. The slave is violently uprooted from his milieu. He is desocialized and depersonalized ... The next phase involves the introduction

of the slave into the community of his master, but it involves the paradox of introducing him as a nonbeing” (38). This depersonalization and natal alienation is made evident in the bangles’ sentimental meaning which gestures towards a human history, a link to a distant past, which colonial ideology attempts to sever in order to establish its dominant position over the Other (Patterson 103 – 132). To Somiela, the bangles represent a sense of family and of belonging, and instil in her the sense of safety these ideas provide. Similarly, the dress with silk decoration that she is asked to alter, a dress her mother had made for her, *her* dress, signifies a link to family and its remembrance and therefore a sense of natal belonging. Consequently, she tells De Villiers, “[i]t’s the only thing I have of my mother” (Jacobs 70). Here, Jacobs represents not only the institutionalising of slavery through natal alienation but shows how slaves were stripped of personal ownership and how this functions in a context in which the slave is, ironically, personally owned: that is, they are stripped of property in order to themselves be rendered property. Significantly, Marieta asks why a “common slave has such things?” (Jacobs 26) and re-establishes Somiela’s position as slave while the mention of “common” tarnishes her obvious beauty, which Marieta finds very disconcerting. The removal of Somiela’s bangles and dress therefore signify a second function: struck by her beauty, this is also an attempt on the white woman’s part to defile it.

When she arrives at Zoetewater, the women as well as the men of the household are struck by her unsettling beauty. We are told that

[s]laves came in various shades of swarthinness. This one was light-complexioned with green eyes and a heart-shaped face, with brown hair falling naturally past her shoulders to her waist. Her dress was trimmed with her lace, tight across the bodice, with a full skirt, and even though it showed no skin, couldn’t conceal her burgeoning maturity. ( Jacobs 25)

While we have previously been told that Somiela was “too handsome” and “more beautiful” (Jacobs 17) than any slave Arend, a fellow slave on Zoetewater, had ever seen, this is the first detailed, exterior, description of Somiela. Furthermore, in her description of Somiela’s body, Jacobs inscribes the complexities of discourse. From the focal point of the De Villiers family, Somiela is described from an objective perspective with the definitive “slave” as first reference point, establishing her undifferentiated status. However, Jacobs’s description of her skin colour, qualified by “slaves came in *various* shades of swarthinness” (emphasis added) and followed by the pronoun “*this* one” (emphasis added) in the next sentence simultaneously objectifies and differentiates her from the previously defined generalisation. Therefore, the reference to “this one”, while objectifying her, does marginally provide a sort of definite identity as it implies a “her versus them” comparison and thereby sets her apart from general

stereotype – albeit from an objectified perspective. Here, one finds an example of the narrative strategy Jacobs employs that “approaches the issue of resistance from within a dominant discursive perspective only to add the subversive elements as parts of otherwise hegemonic designations” (Olaussen 39). That is, while the novel remains historically accurate it sketches resistance within hegemonic spaces of domination.

The subsequent portrayal of Somiela is interesting. The description is clearly intended to convey the jealous, and thereby threatening, tone of the De Villiers women through its fixation on the sensual and sexualised description of Somiela’s body. However, it is not purely her beauty which they see as threatening, but also her skin colour. Gqola argues that the white women on the farm base their unsettling response to Somiela’s beauty on the lighter shade of her complexion, which, she argues, underlines “the threat posed by Somiela’s light skin and its possibility to blur the distinction between Black/slave and White/free” (“Slaves” 52). Rachel, the other female slave on the farm, who works in the kitchen, articulates this threat when noting,

[d]on’t you see? You’re a threat to her. You’re a slave and you dare to look white, dare to have straight hair, green eyes, and then have the cheek to open your mouth. (Jacobs 33)

According to Gqola, “the threat to which Rachel alludes concerns Somiela’s ability to transgress boundaries of colour which distinguish between free and enslaved. The ability to approximate whiteness is a “potentially subversive activity” (“Slaves” 53) and one that threatens the stability of the slave institution on the farm. Valerie Smith explains that

[s]ystems of racial oppression depend upon the notion that one can distinguish between the empowered and disempowered populations. Those boundaries that demarcate racial difference are best policed by monitoring the congress between members of opposite sexes of opposite races. Yet the bodies of mixed-race characters defy the binaries upon which constructions of racial identity depend ... The light-skinned black body thus both invokes and transgresses the boundaries between the races and the sexes that structure [colonialist] social hierarchy. (qtd. in Gqola, “Slaves” 51)

Hence the regulations around dress to establish alternative ways of differentiation. If “Somiela’s approximation of whiteness positions her as one who is in competition with white women for the attention of white men” (51), then her beauty not only challenges racial binaries but poses a sexual threat to the women as well.

Indeed, various descriptions of Somiela’s appearance focus on her beauty. Andries de Villiers is immediately struck by the “astonishingly beautiful girl” (Jacobs 15), while his son-

in-law, Marthinus, involuntarily lets slip that she is a “fine-looking thing” (Jacobs 25) and later tells Harman, his brother, that “[t]hat girl is something to look at, don’t think I haven’t noticed” (Jacobs 188). Rachel comments that “[t]he girl was too attractive for her own good” (Jacobs 114) and elsewhere we are told that Somiela was “a young apple, fresh off the tree, sun-washed, and ripe, and uncommonly handsome for a slave” (Jacobs 70).

In the same scene of Somiela’s arrival at Zoetewater, Jacobs juxtaposes the description of Somiela’s beauty with a description of Marieta as “pleasant-looking when she was young but time had been cruel and she looked older than her thirty-eight years” (26). The hostility Somiela is met with is expected. It is further aggravated by Marthinus’s comment that Somiela is a “fine-looking thing” (Jacobs 25). Clearly unsettled by Somiela’s appearance, the white women on Zoetewater resort to violence in order to desecrate her beauty and the threat it poses to the institutional boundaries on the farm. Not satisfied with taking away Somiela’s bangles and dress, markers of her individuality and agency, as discussed, and jealous of the reaction her looks evoked from her fiancé, Elspeth orders Somiela’s long hair, a clear signifier of her sexuality and whiteness, to be cut. Despite Marthinus’ plea to “[g]ive her a chance” (Jacobs 32), Elspeth orders Rachel to fetch the scissors so she can cut Somiela’s hair. Again, as with the removal of her bangles, cutting Somiela’s hair is a violating act by the white woman to interfere with her femininity and aesthetic beauty. While removing her accessories and having her alter her dress agree with the Slave Code stipulations against slave women’s appearances, cutting Somiela’s hair is a trenchant act to harm her exterior and her innate sexual influence. Having stated that she’d feel naked without her bangles, the reader can assume that, from a subjective perspective, the removal of her hair will further deepen a feeling of diminished identity.

In contradiction to the pleasant descriptions of Somiela, Jacobs describes Elspeth in almost animalistic terms. We are told that she is so consumed with irrational jealousy that she “didn’t care how she appeared to [Marthinus] now” (33). Notably, Elspeth’s description of hysteria to the point of appearing bestial is juxtaposed with Somiela’s calculated calmness as her “eyes flashed [and] she stood silent, daring Elspeth to go ahead” (Jacobs 33). Here, Somiela’s resistance is in her silent pride, issuing a dare through inactivity in the composure she maintains as Elspeth “jerked [her] head back, gathered the hair in a bunch, then cut straight across it, chopping it off high in the neck” (Jacobs 33). When Elspeth leaves, Somiela laments; “my mother never cut my hair. It’s my hair. How could she do it? She cut it, Rachel. She cut my hair” (Jacobs 33). The cutting of her hair, something inherently belonging to Somiela, like her bangles, is forcibly done in order to assert her new, subjugated identity. Gqola points out that here Rachel gives the reader insight into Elspeth’s motives, for “Elspeth

felt threatened. The slave had a beauty you had to be born with. Elspeth wanted to shame her, make her look ugly, take away the little that she had” (Jacobs 32). A similar scene later in the novel conveys the same feelings of sexual threat felt by the white women, when Marieta whips Somiela for talking back and insulting her and her daughters. Like Elspeth, Marieta is presented as being suspicious of Somiela’s beauty and the effect it has on the men, specifically her husband, whom she suspects Somiela is seducing in order to “cause trouble in this house” (Jacobs 66). It is also important to note that it is once again Rachel, a slave character, who is able to appraise and articulate the motive behind Marieta’s actions and is presented as a thinking subject.

Gqola notes that the demarcation of Somiela’s beauty is “in accordance with the myth of promiscuous slave sexuality” (“Slaves” 51). As Patterson, Worden and Hartman observe, sexual exploitation of female slaves was a common occurrence in slave- owning communities as the master took full ownership of the female slave’s body. Indeed, Davis comments that “[s]lavery relied as much on routine sexual abuse as it relied on the whip and chain ... In other words, the right claimed by slave owners and their agents over the bodies of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over Black people as a whole” (qtd. in Gqola, “Slaves” 52).

However, the threat posed by Somiela’s sexuality that Elspeth and Marieta feel, stems from not only from a sense of physical jealousy, but also from the possible empowerment as the desired object sexual coercion would allow her. Hartman explains that

[t]he sexual exploitation of the enslaved female, incredulously, served as evidence of her collusion with the master class and as evidence of her power, the power both to render the master weak and, implicitly, to be the mistress of her own subjection. The slave woman not only suffered the responsibility of her sexual (ab)use but also was blameworthy because of her purported ability to render the powerful weak. (*Scenes* 87)

That is, the evidence of sexual desire for a slave woman on the part of white males creates the prospect of seduction. Consequently, Hartman asks whether a slave woman can “use or wield sexuality as a weapon of the weak?” (85). If so, there is a possibility that she can unsettle the dynamic in the household, and, should feelings of attachment arise between slave and slave owner, overthrow the mistress. Hartman elaborates:

How does seduction uphold the perfect submission and, at the same time, assert the alluring, if not endangering, agency of the dominated? It does so by forwarding the strength of weakness. As a theory of power, seduction

contends that there is an ostensible equality between the dominant and the dominated...Thus power comes to be defined not by domination but by the manipulations of the dominated...In this regard, the recognition of the agency of the dominated and the power of the weak secures the fetters of subjection, while proclaiming the power and influence of those shackled and tethered. (88 – 89)

Furthermore, the violent language in the description of the injuries enacted upon her, in contradiction to Somiela's human lamentation, dehumanises Elspeth as opposed to the Other. Subjectivity is thus doubly awarded here. This detailed violent description is important as it ironically grants Somiela subjectivity through the explicit nature of the narration. In other words, it is intended that the uninhibited nature of the brutality enacted on Somiela should inform and unsettle the reader as to the unfair violence slaves were often met with. Similarly, as Sangora is put in chains, we are told that "his eyes ate into [Elspeth's]". Consequently, "[h]er smile faded. The man at her side looked away" (Jacobs 35) and the wrong done unto his body is heightened by his silent, inactive acceptance that he cannot resist. In contrast to the humane description of Somiela, Elspeth is rendered animalistic and therefore marginal. This subverts traditional representations of slaves that frequently attempted to subjugate them to a position in which they were made equal to animals. Moreover, we are told that Marieta "was feeling her age, and didn't much like what she saw in the mirror. The irritable mouth, the set jaw, the flinty eyes, the little hairs sprouting and growing darker on the stiff, upper lip – all were reminders of a body made ugly by a bitter soul" (Jacobs 70). The comparison of the two descriptions, of which the latter favours Somiela, once more subverts the white woman's power and offers subjectivity to the slave character.

### **2. 3 Subversion from Within: Spaces of Resistance**

When confronted with why she is still wearing her mother's dress despite it having been confiscated, Somiela answers, "[b]ecause I won't wear your fat daughters' ugly dresses" (Jacobs 66). Already agitated, Marieta's reaction is immense and she continues to beat Somiela with a whip. Here, like Elspeth, Marieta is described in animalistic terms which serve to dehumanise her, thereby heightening the inhumanity of her actions. We are told that Marieta "screeched" and "shrieked" at Somiela. Furthermore, the description of her with "[h]er bonnet ... sitting askew on her head, the shawl hanging off one shoulder" (Jacobs 68) renders her description ridiculous and debunks the portrayal of the mistress as "in control". Significantly, Jacobs contrasts Marieta's description as being "consumed with rage", with



Somiela “[standing] silent. She wouldn’t cry out. She wouldn’t touch the spot where it burned” (Jacobs 68).

Ntabishang Motsemme theorises silence during violent and traumatic contexts as an act of resistance in her article “The Mute Always Speaks”. She states that it is within an analysis of

silence and secrets within violating contexts that we can identify the resistance elements of silence. If, as de Certeau (1984) indicates, the tactics of resistance of oppressed individuals and groups can be located in the ways they manoeuvre constraining spaces and thus subvert the logics and practices of the established order in everyday life. (“The Mute” 918)

Silence as a subtle act of resistance is therefore in accordance with Scott’s explanation that

it seemed far more important to understand what we might call everyday forms of peasant resistance – the prosaic but constant struggle between peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents and interest from them. Most of the forms this struggle takes stop well short of collective outright defiance. Here I have in mind the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups: foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. (xvi)

Somiela is not presented as being completely powerless, for she “continues to speak where a slave should not, challenging the language in which she is represented” (Gqola, “Slaves” 55). She directly challenges Rachel’s insistence that “[s]laves don’t have opinions. They stand with their mouths shut and take it” (Jacobs 33). Later in the novel we are told that “[h]er hair which had been ruthlessly cut off by the farmer’s daughter, had undergone a further drastic change, and was now cropped close to the scalp, making her look like a boy. It wasn’t at all what a girl would choose to do to herself” (Jacobs 102). Sangora, the focaliser at this point, wonders whether she had “cut her hair deliberately to make herself ugly? If so, she hadn’t succeeded. There was less than a fingertip’s length of hair – yet strangely, the look, lean and mean as it was, didn’t diminish her appearance, but instead accentuated the fine lines of her face” (Jacobs 102). The effect here is intended to subvert the earlier torture. As the motivation for Elspeth’s attack is aimed at erasing Somiela’s beauty, the cutting of her own hair is intended to pre-empt and challenge whatever Elspeth could do next to dim the slave girl’s beauty. Furthermore, it acts as a signifier for the entire event and its implicit meaning, and accounts for her “provocative” manner as she waits “for the inlander (Harman) to respond” (Jacobs 102). While Somiela subverts Elspeth’s act in her mimicry of it, it is with ironic effect as it only serves to accentuate her beauty. Gqola adds that “[t]he act foregrounds her agency

even as it motions to internalised self-hatred, finding expression through self-mutilation” (Gqola, “Slaves” 55).

It is significant to note that Sangora’s forceful and noticeable acts of resistance are punished in the novel. When he openly challenges De Villiers on the issue of someone cutting Somiela’s hair the farmer’s response is to put him in chains. As Scott notes:

Forms of stubborn resistance are especially well documented in the vast literature on American slavery, where open defiance was normally foolhardy. The history of resistance to slavery in the antebellum U.S. South is largely a history of foot dragging, false compliance, flight, feigned ignorance, sabotage, theft, and, not least, cultural resistance. These practices, which rarely if ever called into question the system of slavery as such, nevertheless achieved far more in their unannounced, limited, and truculent way than the few heroic and brief armed uprising about which so much has been written. (34)

The novel is therefore shown to allow silent forms of resistance in secret spaces hidden from the slave masters, in accordance with Scott’s description of “weapons of the weak”, while punishing obvious uprisings.

### 2.3.1 The Kitchen

The extensive work by Gabeba Baderoon on the representations of Islam in South African media and culture is valuable in relation to tracing spaces of slave subjectivity in *The Slave Book*. Baderoon has produced various works on how Muslim slaves, as what she calls “oblique figures”, are consistently depicted in various subjected ways, yet ironically reveal traces of subversion within these representations. One such space where slave subjectivity is revealed is in the kitchen.

Baderoon comments that “[i]n *The Slave Book*, the place where food is made is also the site of a brittle, dangerous intimacy between slave-owners and slaves, where any encounter may turn suddenly perilous” (Baderoon, “Sea as Memory” 99). Indeed, upon Somiela’s arrival at Zoetewater she gradually takes over from Rachel, who traditionally did all the cooking. This registers as a point of contestation between Somiela and the white women on the farm, as we are told that De Villiers prefers the dishes she makes. On two occasions he draws specific attention to her cooking ability. Upon Harman’s arrival at the farm, De Villiers specifically commissions Somiela to make the spicy “maleier” dish, cabbage bredie, as opposed to the traditional “boerekos” of roast meat, carrots and potatoes that his

wife planned to serve to the guests. When Marieta resists De Villiers's suggestion, he addresses Somiela directly, stating "[m]ake what the nooi tells you, Rachel. Somiela, you make that cabbage food for me" (Jacobs 66). Marieta's reaction is violent. Turning on Somiela, after her husband leaves, she accuses her of being a "little slut" who "wants to cause trouble in this house" (Jacobs 66). Marieta's distress over the favour her husband clearly bestows upon Somiela is a manifestation of the sexual jealousy she harbours against the slave. As Olaussen puts it, "Somiela's cooking is indeed depicted within a sphere of intimacy also in the sense that the preference that the owner, Andries, shows for her food and the ensuing jealousy of his wife cannot be distinguished from the sexual interest and jealousy that Somiela's attractiveness creates" (36). Subsequently, that night at the dinner table Harman also expresses a like for Somiela's food despite Marieta's attempt to degrade the "maleier food" by stating there is "too many chillies in it" (Jacobs 76). When De Villiers mentions that it was Somiela who cooked it, Marieta resentfully reflects; "why had her husband mentioned it? There was also something in his choice of words, as if he wanted to draw attention to the girl and on hearing that it was Somiela who had cooked the food, both brothers reacted" (Jacobs 76).

Jacobs describes Somiela's cooking as a signifier of individuality that sets her apart from the other slaves. Moreover, it is depicted as desirable, thereby imbuing her with agency. In a later description of a meal that Somiela serves to Harman, we are told that

he liked the flavoursome food he ate at Zoetewater, and had learned to tell the difference between Rachel's and Somiela's cooking. Both women used spice in the food to liven it up, but Somiela's dishes, he noticed, had a sharper taste. 'She'll learn,' Rachel had once said when he asked for water after a particularly strong-tasting meal. 'Somiela uses too much garlic and chillies.' He didn't know if he wanted Somiela to learn. The sadistic green chillies brought tears to his eyes, but added a real bite to the food. (Jacobs 113)

Baderoon remarks that "food in the Cape was incontrovertibly linked to slavery. Cooking and other domestic work was the most common reason for keeping slaves; in the 1820s and 1830s two-thirds of the approximately six thousand slaves in the Cape performed domestic work" ("Sea as Memory" 101). This in turn allowed slaves a measure of agency as they were responsible for cooking and serving the food, and allowed opportunities to tamper with it. Accordingly, after Marieta whips Somiela for speaking back to her, the slave reflects on the revenge she intends to take on the white woman: "Tasting the saltiness of her own blood, she promised herself that she would make this monstrous woman pay. The first opportunity she had she would pee in her coffee, poison her food" (Jacobs 68–69).

Jacobs presents the space of the kitchen and the agency cooking allows slaves as subversive spaces which offer them opportunities of action and resilience despite being chained into acts of subservience. Baderoon further notes that in the kitchen,

slaves learned not only how to survive but gathered a small store of subjectivity and resistance. Rachel, a slave who has been on the Zoetewater farm for twenty-two years, comforts the newly arrived Somiela: “[I]n the kitchen you hear many things” (30). The kitchen is where the slaves on the farm attain presence, stare silently back at the slave-owner, or reclaim time by carrying out their orders at a pace that infuriates their masters. The slave Somiela cooks the way she is accustomed to, and speaks back to the masters through the codes of taste and smell that the latter eventually come to desire. (Baderoon, “Sea as Memory” 99)

The kitchen is therefore depicted as an intimate space that allows slaves to manifest a language of food, speaking of slave culture, individuality and agency. It also acts as a physical space in which defiance and subversion may be enacted.

### 2.3.2 The Slave Quarters

The intimacy that Jacobs creates among the female slaves in the domestic space of the kitchen is mirrored by similar spaces of intimacy among the male slaves. Rules in the Slave Code such as slaves “are not to meet in bars, buy alcohol, or form groups, on public holidays” and “are not to stop in the street to talk to other slaves” (Jacobs 11) were introduced to discourage the formation of camaraderie.<sup>15</sup> De Villiers tells us that “to have [slaves] all from the same part of the world, speaking the same language, was asking for trouble. You mixed up the races to avoid mutiny” (Jacobs 14). Yet the novel sketches spaces in which the slave characters resiliently form a band of brotherhood in defiance of this strategy.

When Sangora is put in chains for challenging De Villiers about the cutting of Somiela’s hair, the male slaves on the farm present him with a key to unlock them at night so he might be comfortable and allow the sores around his ankles to heal. We are told that “Arend presented Sangora with a long iron key and a set of smaller ones. He also brought out the poultices his mother (Rachel) had secretly prepared for the festering sores on the carpenter’s ankles” (Jacobs 56). Rachel’s collaboration in this subversion is once again marked by access to the kitchen. Sangora tells Arend that “it’s a good thing your mother’s in

<sup>15</sup> One of the more famous instances of slave mutiny is the “Galant revolt”, named after a slave Galant who led his fellow slaves in revolt, and murdered his slave master and his family. Andre Brink’s *Chain of Voices* is a fictional account of this historical occurrence.

the kitchen to give us all these things” (Jacobs 56), gesturing towards the instances of agency this space allows her. Subsequently, Sangora is told to “remove [the poultice] in the morning before Kananga comes” (Jacobs 56). In the intimate space of the slave house where the male slaves sleep, an unarticulated bond of camaraderie is established, removed from the watchful and domineering eye of the master, as well as his mandoor, Kananga. Indeed, we are told that the slaves “all knew about the keys” and that they “held their breaths” as Sangora turned the key that would unlock his chains. Here, through the quiet, unspoken description of solidarity between the slaves, Jacobs creates a space of resistance and illustrates that within spaces of domination, even ones as confining as Sangora’s chains, they are able to find moments of action and agency.

This moment of camaraderie is pre-empted by a similar occasion where Arend allies himself with Sangora in defiance of De Villiers. When Sangora is first introduced to the slaves upon his arrival at Zoetewater, De Villiers asks Arend to translate the Melayun language he and Somiela speak in order to learn their names. Before they are taken to the jongenshuis, Sangora turns to Somiela and tells her in Melayu that “[i]t won’t be forever ... one day we’ll be free” (Jacobs 24). Suspicious of communication between slaves De Villiers asks Andries to translate, but the latter purposefully deceives him by telling him “[h]e told her to behave” (Jacobs 24-25). Scott mentions that, “the subculture created in the slave quarter was normally hidden from the master’s view” (329), which is evident in Jacobs’s representation of these acts of subtle resistance by the slaves on Zoetewater.

### 2.3.3 Dar-el-Islam

Another rule stipulated in the Slave Code states that slaves “are not to gather near the entrance of a church during church services” (Jacobs 11). While it was the paternalistic practice to indoctrinate slaves into Christianity, Jacobs’s novel presents religion and its practice as a potentially subversive space. Indeed, the novel opens with a description of Islam as being an undesirable trait in a slave for “you don’t want a slave having any ideas at all” (Jacobs 14). Worden remarks that Islam offered “a degree of independent slave culture” separate from that of slave-owners (“Slavery” 4), while Baderoon argues that practices of Islam can be read as spaces of subversion as “Islam survived through hidden practices of subversion by slaves, shaping communal relations, language and food rituals that survive among descendants of slaves even today” (“Sea as Memory” 4).

Baderoon’s extensive work on the “oblique” placement of “Malay” figures highlights the subversive presence of Islamic culture. Her studies comprise an analysis of a variety of

colonial-era representations to be found in nineteenth century South African art. Baderoon maintains that “[w]hat is striking about these various nineteenth century paintings is that Malay figures appear in them in two distinct ways: there are numerous studies in which ‘Malays’ form the central subject of the paintings, yet perhaps more intriguingly, landscapes and panoramas of Cape Town and its outskirts consistently feature ‘Malay’ figures placed near the edges of the paintings, near the frame” (“Imagining Islam” 2). She explains that the term “Malay” refers to a complex “shifting Creole reality” which refers to the “use of Bahasa Melayu as a lingua franca of the Indian Ocean region (including East Africa, Malagasy, India and South East Asia) from which most slaves came” (“Imagining Islam” 2). The term “Malay” is synonymously used with “Islam” and far from accurately describing the geographical origin of the people so termed, the word more faithfully referred to the belonging of a global community.

Meg Samuelson reads the presence of Islam in *The Slave Book* as a “structuring device” that “produces a sense of unity out of discordance, and enables the recreation of home and community among a randomly produced group comprised of members who hail from Celebes, Ceylon, Java, Malabar, and Malaya” (“Making Home” 300). Islam therefore provides a sense of home and belonging to those violently alienated from their origins. Harman experiences the overwhelming feeling of unity and home when he visits the Imam with Salie for the first time:

He didn’t know what they were saying, didn’t know them, their origins —  
And they were a strange mix, of all colours and manner of dress and manner  
— but [he] somehow understood the importance of their worshipping  
together in that room. No one was doing anything different. All were  
following the imam up front. (Jacobs 156)

Despite the disparate geographical origins of the various slaves, Islam allows them to come together in a sense of unity and re-create a space of belonging, outside of the slavocratic institution. Sangora echoes this sentiment when he explains that Islam is “a display of faith, a tradition. Brought here from overseas by the slaves. It’s good for people who don’t have a belief system to see what you can do if you have faith. A normal man needs his God. Now what about a slave? As a slave you have to have faith or you’ll give up. You don’t have anything else” (Jacobs 157). Islam is therefore employed in the novel to designate spaces of a slave subculture.

Baderoon places *The Slave Book* in a context of what she terms “subversive archives” of slave resistance in the practices of language, religion and food culture, but also subsumed behind “the picturesque portrayals of the Cape” (“Sea as Memory” 89). According to

Baderoon, “[u]nder the Statutes of India through which the Dutch governed the Cape Colony, the public practice of Islam was punishable by death, so Islam survived through hidden practices of subversion by slaves, shaping communal relations, language, and food rituals that survive among descendants of slaves even today” (“Sea as Memory” 92). These hidden moments of Islamic practices are scattered throughout Jacobs’s novel. Gqola shows how Islam, presented as the religion of the slaves, is “used as a trope through which to redeem the slave characters from overdetermination by the discourses of the master class” (“What Is Slavery” 153). She argues that:

Islam functioned to support the slaves’ link not only to the homes from which they were wrenched, but also to one another; to older senses of community as well as to newer clusterings with other slaves with different geographical origins, but shared religion. It offered for the enslaved a connection to an identity prior to capture and exile: a home. Islam offered for the converts a worldwide family in the Imam. (“What Is Slavery” 155)

Upon his arrival at the farm, Sangora is given a new name – a phenomenon which was not an uncommon practice in slavery at the Cape. As in the novel, it was frequently used to instil a sense of ownership by the master. De Villiers renames Sangora “February” in an attempt to remove the marker of his faith, which was considered dangerous and potentially disruptive, and was a way to deal with slaves who could be distrustful and rebellious. Therefore, renaming Sangora achieves two outcomes. Firstly, it would remove any immediate association with his faith as he no longer has a Mohametan name, consequently stripping him of his religious identity. As Sangora was put up for auction by his previous owner because he “preached to the other slaves, converting them, giving them ideas” (Jacobs 14), De Villiers is already dubious about the slave’s obedience. Sangora’s religion is seen as a threat to the dynamic and the institution at Zoetewater, and De Villiers attempts to strip him of this by removing his name. By renaming Sangora, any ties to whatever pre-existing identity he had before being enslaved, is denied and this sense of natal alienation would serve to immerse him in the colonial discourse on the farm.

Sangora is frequently presented as speaking out and being opinionated. On one such occasion, right at the onset of their arrival at Zoetewater, Sangora informs De Villiers of his and Somiela’s names, speaking in Dutch, instead of waiting for Arend to translate on his behalf. In response, we are told that “Andries narrowed his eyes as he looked at the slave. He hadn’t invited Sangora to speak. But the response was informative. It showed courage. Also that the slave was articulate” (Jacobs 24). Sangora’s speaking out of turn, his ability to communicate in Dutch, as well as his description as being articulate, all serve to set him apart



from the other slaves. While Somiela is told that she may keep her name, Sangora's name is changed to "February" in order to curb his individuality and, accordingly, his agency. However, Sangora refuses to respond to his slave name "February", and obstinately refers to himself as "Sangora". This is exemplified in Harman's first exchange with the slaves, when De Villiers orders the slaves to pronounce their names in turn. Sangora's quiet defiance is boldly evident when he responds;

'Sangora Salamah. From Java,' he announced in a calm tone.

Andries stepped up to him. 'What did you say?'

'Sangora Salamah. From Java.'

'Didn't I change your name?'

'Sangora Salamah's my name, Seur.' (Jacobs 97)

De Villiers's response is to smack "his fist into the dark face before him" (Jacobs 97). Sangora's resistance to De Villiers's naming, and thereby the institution of slavery over him, is depicted in his constant repudiation of this new name, and the reiteration of "Sangora Salamah's [his] name. The name [he] was born with" (Jacobs 97). Sangora refuses the erasure of his Mohametan name, as it forms a link to his roots and thereby his rightful identity as a free man. His name is his attempt to cling to the identity given to him by birth, free from his slave existence and De Villiers's mastership. His birth name comes to represent his struggle with ownership, comparable to the way in which Somiela's hair, bangles and dress represent hers. Similarly, the other slaves on the farm frequently forget to refer to Sangora as "February", while Harman refuses to do so altogether.

## 2.4 Conclusion

As a work falling within the genre of historical fiction, *The Slave Book* by Radya Jacobs uses romance emplotment to explore slave subjectivity through offering brief insights into the slave characters and their context, in order to encourage readers to actively "re-member" a past through "glimpses" into the human minds of the people who used to populate the Cape.

Though the narrative centres on the supposedly forbidden and subversive love that emerges between Somiela and Harman, the plot is divulged by an omniscient third-person narrator, who uses various other slave characters as focalisers, excavating their subjectivity and illustrating each consecutively as a subjectively thinking agent. Such descriptions are arranged in contrast to the inhuman and often animalistic portrayal of the De Villiers family, which serves to further imbue slave characters with unique humanity, and emphasises the value of their interiority. Jacobs's placement of the apparently interracial union of Somiela

and Harman at the centre of her fiction serves to reinforce a deeper understanding of the agency of the slave subjects as well as the individualising aspects of interiority, and the ordinary, in line with Ndebele's argument.

The romance emplotment inherent in *The Slave Book* is therefore central to Jacobs's narrative technique as it opens a juxtaposition of interior and exterior spaces, both of which allow for a mediation of subjectivity. These moments form "glimpses" into spaces occluded from historiography and the archive that excavate slave voice. The revelation of the slaves' agency is explicated not only through interaction with slaves and instances where their interiority is revealed, but also in their interactions both with other slaves, as well as with their masters and mistresses. Spaces existing both extraneously and intrinsically are demarcated within the narrative to act as sites for the subversion of the prejudice and suppression forced upon the slaves, granting them the freedom to reassert their individual, personal humanity.

### CHAPTER 3

## LOOKING SIDEWAYS: SILENCE IN YVETTE CHRISTIANSË'S *UNCONFESSED*

*So there I was, rattling my chains in the corridors of the colonial archive, and I began to learn to look sideways. – Yvette Christiansë (Interview with Tavis Smiley)*

The representation of slaves as historical figures and an exploration of their subjectivity within the South African context always entails a negotiation with the archive. But how is the archive to be negotiated while resisting a re-affirmation of the ideologies and discourses it hosts? Yvette Christiansë's novel *Unconfessed* (2006) offers silences, which it approaches through a self-reflexive and fragmented narrative structure as possible "conceptual lenses" through which to engage with this question.

*Unconfessed* centres on an historical slave woman, Sila van den Kaap, who was sentenced to death by strangulation for the kindermoord, or "child murder", of her 9 year old son, Baro. While information surrounding Sila's life is scarce, the documented birth of a child sometime after her incarceration suggests that – following British law – her life was spared due to the fact that she was pregnant. Instead, Sila was left in prison. A few years later, she was moved to Robben Island to serve out an extended sentence of fourteen years, during and after which her fate is unknown. The specific interest of this chapter lies in the novel's concern with the exploration and representation of Sila's subjectivity as a slave, her subjectivity surrounding the extenuating circumstances of Baro's murder and the consequent engagement with her agency as she never directly confesses to the crime.

Christiansë comments that "[a]ny attempt to speak of the woman who killed her son on December 24, 1822, any attempt to speak of the circumstances that brought her to this point of violence, and any attempt to speak of what befell her as a result, has to negotiate the Cape Archive" (Christiansë, "Heartsore" np ). However, given the fragmented, "silenced" and "silent" nature of the court records representing Sila's trial and their subsequent documentation, it is my conclusion that these "attempts to speak" face the kind of the oppressive silencing found within the archive in the conventional manner of what Derrida calls "violent hierarchies" (*Of Grammatology*). I will argue that it is through the metaphoric use of silence, which lies at the heart of Christiansë's narrative, that the novel engages with the complexities of slave subjectivity and its lack of representation in the archive.

This chapter opens with a discussion of the “violent hierarchies” and the silences within the archive, of voices muted and absent, in an attempt to inform how *Unconfessed* explores the meaning that is situated within the inclusionary and exclusionary nature of archival documentation, and how it relates to slave subjectivity and agency. I move to an exploration of silence as a chosen register of resistance to criminalisation, slavery and representation, akin to what Nthabiseng Motsemme has excellently theorised in her work on the metaphoric articulation of silence as “the mute always speak”. There is no documentation of an official, or direct, confession to Baro’s murder on Sila’s part, just the word “heartseer”, and Christiansē avoids imposing a fictional one on her protagonist. While the novel cannot contest the fact that Sila was indeed a slave who killed her son, I argue that, as the title suggests, the “unconfession” by both the historical and fictional Sila is indicative of a resistance to being entered into the archive as *only* “murderer” and “slave”, and therefore simultaneously gestures towards the way that slavery, colonialism and archive deny alternative representation and voice. What alternative representations are available? Rayda Jacobs’s *The Slavebook* attempts to offer insight into the existence of slaves by presenting historically accurate accounts of their lives in a romantic fashion. Jacobs’s romance is able to provide a focus on subjectivity through its fully articulate narration and detail. *Unconfessed*, in contrast, actively engages the question of representation of slave subjectivity in its narrative content and form through the use of metaphoric silences. Rather than simply trying to grant Sila an articulate voice, the novel represents her as a “silenced” and “silent” character, who resists relating her story as subordinate subject.

By presenting Sila as “silent”, Christiansē gives Sila a “voice” while enabling resistance to the re-affirmation of her subordinate state. It is my contention that an articulate and coherent factual account of her life would re-produce the ideologies reflected in the archive, where her representational state is defined by and confined to subordination. Through a rich layering of various forms of “silences” within the novel, Christiansē’s narrative strategy is to “look sideways” (Christiansē in Smiley). That is, the act of “looking sideways” provides a conceptual perspective with which to understand the metaphorical implication of these silences. In turn, they offer spaces, paradoxically filled with silence, in which its subject finally finds a voice in “a silence which speaks” (something midway between Motsemme’s mute and Spivak’s subaltern), to narrate her life and articulate her resistance against the condition of slavery.

In the final section of this chapter, I move to a textual analysis of this narrative strategy. Sila’s inscription into the archive, “not as a self-authorising presence, but as a trace” (Christiansē, “Heartseer” np) is reflected in the narrative structure, content and typography of

the novel. In relation to the content, Christiansë deviates from a linear narrative temporality in favour of a fragmented and achronological plot structure that accommodates silence at the heart of the narrative. Mimicking her status as “archival trace”, these fragments offer only traces of Sila’s narration and denies the reader’s desire to know everything.<sup>16</sup> Typographically, these traces of subjectivity are separated by spaces on the page containing nothing; no words; silence – and it is left to the reader to make the associative connections between narrative segments.

The silences to be found in *Unconfessed* therefore not only open a space for new negotiations of the identity of those defined as subordinate by the dominant colonial ideology, but also emphasise the injustice and oppressive nature of these discourses and the extent to which their subjects were denied agency, specifically in the archive. The various silences inscribed in Sila’s subordinate and colonial existence as “murderer” and “slave”, and echoed in her archival representation, are subverted by Christiansë’s presentation of these silences as expressive instead of stifling, as self-regulating as opposed to subjugating and in this sense, imbues her with agency.

### 3.1. Oppressive Silencing and Derrida’s “Violent Hierarchies”

*In this [archival] ‘trace’, we find [Sila] within a triple discursive imprisonment: black female slave. Each term designates a structure of foreclosure, a mode of categorical exclusion from the full and putatively universal subjecthood of ‘free white male’. - Christiansë (“Heartsore”)*

#### 3.1.1. The Archival Trace

In an interview with Tavis Smiley, Yvette Christiansë relates how her discovery of the historical figure Sila van den Kaap was purely accidental. While doing research in the Cape Archives for her planned novel on slavery, Christiansë happened upon a letter from the colonial office in London which made enquiries into the survival of a slave called Sila van den Kaap, who was still alive and kept in prison despite having been sentenced to death three years earlier. Intrigued, she began to research this slave woman’s history and started to trace the mention of her name across archival records. Yet, as Christiansë states, “everywhere [she] went, [she] found silence” (Christiansë in Smiley), as the records never filled in the extenuating circumstances for this woman; they merely made mention of her (slave) name

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<sup>16</sup> This ‘denial’ forms part of Meg Samuelson’s argument on the kindermoord as trope for resistance to inscription into the colonial archive and a slave genealogy which will be discussed later in the chapter.

and stated definitive facts such as the number of children she bore and the act of kindermoord of which she was found guilty. Drawing on the extensive research published in “‘Heartsore’: The Melancholy Archive of Cape Colony Slavery” (Christiansë 2009),<sup>17</sup> in what follows I offer a brief discussion of Sila’s life and the events which lead up to and followed the murder of Baro, in order to clarify the silences surrounding this slave woman, the nature of these silences, and what they come to mean in the novel.

Chronologically, Sila’s first appearance in the Cape Archive is in the will of Hendrina Jansen. The will stated that a number of slaves, of which one was named Drucella, would be released into manumission, pending their repayment of a certain price to Jansen’s son and heir, J.J. Theron. However, as various court records and contestations of this will convey, this never took place. In 1810, Theron sent Sila to work for a merchant named Carl Hancke, presumably to work off this debt and be released into freedom. Yet records show that in 1816 both Hancke and Theron attempted to claim ownership of Sila. Theron claimed that Sila had been sold to Hancke for a sum of 1000 Rix dollars, of which only 500 had been received. On the grounds that the sale had therefore not been completed, he demanded that ownership be returned to him. What followed was a variety of back and forth contestations between Hancke and Theron until the latter was finally ordered to return Sila and her children to Hancke and pay a fine of 500 Rix dollars, or be faced with three months’ incarceration on Robben Island. Bizarrely, in 1817 prison records indicate that Sila and her children were placed into what can be seen as “protective custody” in prison, presumably to protect them from both men, until Jansen’s insolvent estate was settled. The matter was finally concluded and with the permission of the fiscal Sila and her children were removed from prison by Hancke and sold to Stephanus Van der Wat, a farmer in Plettenberg Bay.

In 1818, a boy named Baro is registered by Van der Wat, along with an older female slave, Drusilia. Here the archive remains silent regarding Sila’s life on Van der Wat’s farm, until the mention of the date of Baro’s murder: December 24<sup>th</sup> 1822. However, documents on court proceedings and testimonies regarding the murder provide details as to the harsh kind of life this could have been. According to these records, on the day of Baro’s murder, Sila was ordered to clean bed linens and had sent Baro to fetch lemons with which to remove stains. Baro returned, having been beaten by Van der Wat. It is suggested that, to soothe his pain, and to remove him from a life which, according to her experience, would result in similar and worse beatings, she cut his throat. Following this, Sila ran to Witte Drift, the farm of the Field Cornet Van Huisteen, and subsequently handed herself over.

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<sup>17</sup> This is the only publication to date that attempts to piece together and offer an explanation for Sila’s archival traces. I find that the archive’s “silencing” regarding slave subjectivity, creates even more empathy for the slave woman.

In March 1823 Sila was tried for murder. Significantly, during the trial Sila called upon a fellow slave named Jephta to attest to similar beatings he had received from Van der Wat, in an attempt to legitimise her claim to the torture she and Baro had endured. It is assumed that, for unknown reasons, Jephta lied, accusing Sila of being a drunk and stating that neither his master nor his mistress ever beat him. The Field Cornet and one Carl Schaffer, who was present when Sila arrived at Witte Drift, and who both examined Baro's corpse, testified that they "immediately examined the whole of the child's body [and] found nothing but a trifling mark of an old sore on the right thigh" (Christiansë, "Heartsore", np). As a result, the court found that Sila's claims to ill-treatment were falsified in an attempt to justify her actions.

Following her trial in March 1823, she was sentenced to death by strangulation. However, in 1826 her name reappears in a correspondence between the colonial office in London and the officials of the Cape Colony. It seems Sila's life had been spared due to the fact that she was pregnant at the time and could not lawfully be executed. In September 1826 she was sent to Robben Island to serve a sentence of fourteen years hard labour in exchange for her freedom. Records indicate that Sila gave birth to two children during this incarceration. After 1830, during which she was still imprisoned on Robben Island, Sila vanishes from archival records. Her fate is unknown.

### 3.1.2 Violent Hierarchies

Recalling Jacques Derrida, textual production of meaning is frequently conducted in terms of "binary opposites", in which a concept is defined as binary, or oppositional, in meaning in relation to another. According to Derrida, these concepts adhere to a "violent hierarchy" in which "one of the two terms controls the other, holds the superior position" (xxvii). As such, "black" will always be defined as a devalued binary to "white", "slave" to "master", and "woman" to "man". As this "violent hierarchy" dictates the production of textual meaning, "one initial hurdle" to contend with in tracing Sila's story is the different variations of her name in archival records: Sila, Siela, Silla, Silia, Drucella, Drusilia, and Drusiela (Christiansë, "Heartsore" np). These variations, as they appear in the numerous court and prison records, the official slave registry and Hendrina Jansen's will, are all an indication of the fight for rightful ownership over Sila in attempt to thwart the colonial powers and claim ownership over her. Left, as they are, in the archive, they silently speak of the colonial contestation of power inscribed upon her body.

These oppressive silences that are a result of the "violent hierarchies" of which



Derrida speaks, are one of the first markers of Sila's shackling. In discursive terms she is classified as "black", "female" and "slave" in binary opposition to the superior "white", "male" and "free" (Christiansë, "Heartsore" np). To Derrida, the privileged term in these hierarchies depends upon the suppression and occlusion of the "other" term to a point in which the inferior is catalogued as that "which it's not" vis-à-vis its opposite (Derrida, "Of Grammatology"). This act of opposition is a "violent" one for "[o]nly when what belongs to the outside is discriminated and excluded can those superior and original terms secure their position on the inside or at the centre" (Guo Chunang 147). From the archive this power relation is clear. In the contestation between Theron and Hancke regarding her ownership, in the manipulation of her name in the registry to suit each (*male*) owner's agenda and in the false testimonies that attempt to sketch Sila as a "bad woman" in order to acquit the owners of any culpability, the power dynamics in these discursive hierarchies are evident.

The influence of the violent hierarchies, and their presence in colonial archival practice, becomes visible through the lack of speech the slave figure is afforded in this setting, as well as the descriptors that are used to refer to them. While at first sight they appear to be merely oppressive, there is insight in the silences that emerge as a result of certain figures not being allowed their own articulation.

### 3.2. Silences in the Archive: Absences and Muted Presences

*[Slaves'] visibility today must be understood as that which was guaranteed by the particular structures ordering the archive. Categorized, classified, and made accessible through alphabetical and numerical coding, as well as chronological sequencing and governmental function, documents reflect the structures of both colonial and, now, national bureaucracy within South Africa's official archive – Christiansë ("Heartsore")*

The court proceedings are telling of the oppressive silence with which Sila, as black female slave, was faced. It is doubtful that this "triple discursive imprisonment" (Christiansë, "Heartsore" np) would allow any validity to her claims, and their subsequent documentation conveys this. Christiansë comments that

[a]s an archival figure, [Sila] responds only to questions and only in the terms and categories posed by those who anticipated their own future recall in the archive. She occupies that position so well described by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* According to Spivak's theory, Sila is structurally muted in that, although we have words from her, the state never granted her full subjectivity, and her

utterances remained, for them, utterly illegible. (“Heartsore” np)

Except for the inclusion of one Dutch word, “hartseer”, which Christiansë translates as “heartsore”, court records provide no *direct* transcript of Sila’s testimony. Instead, we have the testimony of Jephta, a slave, but a *male* slave, sketching Sila as a drunk and “bad woman”. We have the words of the Field Cornet Van Huisteen and Schaffer, both negating Sila’s claim to Baro’s beating, and we have Sila’s attorney, Van Reyneveld, all of whom were Dutch men and who fall under the “subjecthood of free white male”, reporting on Sila’s behalf: Van Huisteen states that upon her arrival at his farm she handed him a knife “and shedding some tears [informed the Field Cornet of the news] that she, through heartsore & grief, had cut the throat of her child named Baro with [the clasp] knife” (Christiansë, “Heartsore” np).

It is interesting, then, that the word “hartseer” remains, scattered amongst the various archival documents. This word crops up in each of the three sentences directly documented as Sila’s testimony as the motive for the kindermoord and has the “status of a verbatim citation” (Christiansë, “Heartsore” np) in both Van Huisteen’s and Schaffer’s testimonies. Why does this word remain when her voice has been all but drowned out? Christiansë claims that

[w]ithin the bureaucratic language that demands and promises the transparency of explanation, the word appears to register among what was considered the language of a female slave – emotional, irrational, and on the edge of unpredictability. At this point, instability is revealed within the fortress of prerogative that shapes the law to which Sila is subject. She may speak but only as a slave woman is expected to speak, and in a manner that makes her speech evidence of her confinement to that status. (“Heartsore” np)

According to Van Reyneveld,

. . . meditating as usual, of her fate and that of her children and concerning that she had no hope, for relief, [Sila] was overwhelmed with grief and sadness and resolved to kill her child and then to destroy her own life also, in order that an end may be made to their miseries, in which moment of utmost desperation, she cut her child’s throat, but on seeing the blood was [struck] with terror, and as it were rendered unable to commit the intended suicide, and then ran to the house of the Field Cornet of the ward and reported the occurrence to them. (Christiansë, “Heartsore” np)

Sila’s voice is therefore almost completely omitted in the archive, and drowned out by the various male voices, who, according to discursive practice, would take precedence. Christiansë reads Van Reyneveld’s appeal on Sila’s behalf as a representation which “describes her in a mode that draws upon the language of sentimentality” (“Heartsore” np)

and therefore overtly female. Moreover, according to Spivak's theory on representation and re-presentation, Sila falls into the former category and as subordinate, her voice makes way for the colonial and patriarchal authority that appears on her behalf, "[i]n effect, when she is before the courts, Sila can only answer, and what she says is what has been already said, but not by her" (Christiansē, "Heartsore" np).

Her inscription into the archive under only one term, "slave", is further revealing of the oppressive silences surrounding her discursive state. While the trial's records reflected the Van der Wats' status as "master" and "mistress", Sila is only entered as "slave". This is indicative of her subordinate state and relational inferiority. Furthermore, while people such as the Van der Wats, Schaffer and Van Huisteen are, according to legislative convention, referred to as "witness," "defendant," "victim," or "appellant", no such allowance is made for Sila. It seems that "slave" is the only signifier allotted to her and her silenced position once more re-affirmed. According to Peter Hitchcock's argument, "language is seen as a shared body of signs, but access to language and semantic authority are not created equally" (5). The complicity between colonial law and slavery is therefore evident for, "[a]lthough slaves could be called to give testimony in court, they remained outside or beyond the categories of witness or appellant" (Christiansē, "Heartsore" np) and their voices are forever demarcated as such.

Thus, in the archive, Sila features as "slave" and "murderess" and always pre-judged in a discriminating light. The silence to be found here is an indication of her inability to speak due to the "violent hierarchies" located within discourse and the "silencing" nature of the archive's representation, for what little information is presented to us on Sila's life is presented by a third party, and therefore already cast in a specific light. Sila is only ever filed in the colonial record under subordinate labels such as "slave" and "murderer". Christiansē comments that "the colonial record has a particular way of speaking about [slaves...for...] one of the ironies about the records that do exist of slaves is that they appear in court records. So slaves were just always already criminalised. And whatever was said by them was redacted by the transcribers of the court" (Christiansē in Smiley). Therefore, not only is there minimal mention made of slaves in the archive, but the circumstances leading to this mention also place them as subordinates. Any reference to slaves therefore pre-empts their marginilisation. Hence, the silence surrounding the various mentions of Sila's name in the colonial records emphasises the oppressive and subjugating nature of these documents. As Christiansē concludes, "it appears that Sila van den Kaap's story is one not only of thwarted hope, bitter disappointment, and stubborn presence, but also of a desire for speech resulting from the inability to be heard fully from within slavery's discourse" (Christiansē, "Heartsore"

np).

Gqola reiterates that, discursively, “[s]laves were configured as wanting in culture and therefore in humanity and subjectivity. Their objectification followed directly from their dehumanisation and these processes jointly ensured that the stereotype became the dominant way through which slave reality is read and interpreted by the Oppressor” (“Slaves” 46). To the court, “hartseer” spoke of the discursive qualities related to colonial and slavocratic law’s authority and treatment of subordinates and the triple categorical imprisonment in which Sila is contained. It spoke of irrationality and hysteria traditionally associated with women. It spoke of the primitive and savage colonialism identified in the Black Other. And it spoke of the non-human, or monstrous, that slavery projected on its subjects.

It is here where the dichotomy in the archive is revealed. For if Sila is silenced, then the silence itself speaks through the mere inclusion of her name and mention of her act. Hamilton et al. explain that “[a]n inquiry around archive(s) also demands an attempt to understand the conditions and circumstances of preservation of material, and the exclusion of material from the record, as well as attention to the relations of power underpinning such inclusions and exclusions” (9). Accordingly, Christiansē states that upon her excursion into the archive she “began to pay attention to the silence, because...the silence in some ways stencilled out the conditions in which a slave woman like this lived” (Christiansē in Smiley).

### 3.2.1. Along The Archival Grain

What then do these silences reveal? And what resounds in the silence in which this one word, “hartseer”, remains? Baderoon’s appropriation of Ann Laura Stoler’s concept of the “granularity” of the archive is of exceptional significance for this thesis. Baderoon explores this concept in various texts on representations of Islam in South Africa historically, as well as in her 2004 PhD thesis (UCT). As Baderoon puts it, Stoler “cautions against reading archives only against the grain and instead calls for a study precisely of their ‘granularity’” (“Oblique” 92). By this, she means attending to the patterns, emphases, omissions, errors and fabrications in the archives. Posing the question as to how one might read the archive in South Africa (“Methodologies” 278), Baderoon finds that the “conventional” practice of this reading has found a compelling model in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. As she explains,

Said’s innovation in *Orientalism* was to contest repositories of authoritative texts and beliefs which had hitherto been unquestioned and for which he was not regarded as the envisaged audience (Hussein 2002, 7) ... Said’s ‘uninvited interventions’ in an established discourse, which by definition sought to exclude him from its constitution,

are a prototype for reading archives in South Africa, structured as they are on exclusion of content and access. (“Methodologies” 279)

However, “this approach to archive [which] reads familiar texts from an unexpected perspective” (“Methodologies” 279) lends itself to precisely what Stoler cautions against. By reading “archiving as a process” (Stoler, “Colonial Archives” 83) she questions methodologies which treat the archive as a mere repository of fact and is therefore only available for “knowledge retrieval” (“Colonial Archives” 85). André Brink provides an interesting thought on the engagement with ideology in produced texts and the attempted subversion of their inherent power structures. According to Brink, we cannot

simply pretend to write alternatives to the accepted texts by subverting, for example, the white and male-dominated constructions of the past through accounts written from the erstwhile margins of black, or female, or any other minority, experience. Simply to replace a patriarchic discourse with a matriarchic approach still respects the patterns and the model that informed the original narrative. In other words, today’s writer has to take note of the fact that the possibilities of writing itself have shifted. The past cannot be corrected by bringing it to the procedures and mechanics and mind-sets that originally produced our very perception of that past. (“Stories of History” 33)

That is, subversion does not so much entail a substitution of one figure for another (e.g. master substituted by slave) which leaves the overarching discourse intact but rather a change in perception which accommodates mindfulness that there are two different discourses to be produced as such. To Stoler “[r]eading along the archival grain draws our sensibilities to the archive’s granular rather than seamless texture, to the rough surface that mottles its hue and shapes its form” (Stoler, “Archival Grain” 53). That is, a reading which questions the meaning behind its omissions, fractures, and silences.

Baderoon entitles her own methodological approach to reading the archive against the grain as an “oblique” glance at the archive and shows how this “oblique” approach enables a processing of fracturing narrative, resisting certainty and amplifying agency by reading the “granularity of the archive” (Stoler). In her work on representations of Islam in South Africa, she uses this approach to analyse marginal figures, such as slaves, in a variety of historical and current representations. In traditional historic panoramas of Cape Town, she identifies

that they almost always feature a figure standing to the side, near the edge of the frame, engaged in one of the identifiable pursuits [related to slaves]. In these paintings and prints, Muslims become visible in a peculiarly structured way – placed to the side near the edge of the frame...they are oblique figures.

By this [she means] that while apparently marginal to the central focus, it is not possible to gaze at centre without the presence of these figures. (“Oblique Figures” 66)

Baderoon’s approach employs Spivak’s argument that

[i]n a certain sense...[there] is nothing that is central. The centre is always constituted in terms of its own marginality, however, having said that, in terms of the hegemonic historical narrative, certain peoples have always been asked to cachet the margins so others can be defined as central. Negotiating between these two structures, sometimes [she has] to see [herself] as marginal in the eyes of others. (Spivak, “The Post-Colonial Critic”, 40-41)

Baderoon’s reading therefore necessitates an approach that reads the margins from unexpected places while conveying responsiveness to the discourses that structure them thus and the inherent dichotomy they contain.

An oblique approach to reading the granularity of the archive is in line with my own project, as suggested in the act of “looking sideways” at what the silences in the archive, and consequently, as engaged with in *Unconfessed*, reveal and (do not) say. One possible deduction would be that the silence and absence found in the archive speak of Sila’s subjugation and subordinate state as slave, for, while she is entered into the archive, it is an entry which occludes a voice of her own as. Since “[o]ne aspect of the context in which Sila lived is the absence of generic forms for slave self-articulation in the Cape Colony [which] is an absence often confused with wilful silence” (Christiansë, “Heartsore” np), it behooves us to ask the following questions: “In what context does she speak? How can she be heard?” (Christiansë, “Heartsore” np).

As discussed previously, one utterance of Sila’s is allowed to remain in the archive as it coincides with discursive representation of the Other. “Hartseer” crops up in each of the three answers Sila provides during her interrogation:

In response to the prosecutor’s question as to whether she admitted to the crime of cutting her son’s throat, Sila allegedly answered [the translation is Christiansë’s]: ‘Yes, because I was heartsore [hartseer] when I cut the throat of my son Baro.’ Asked if she knew that this was a crime for which she would have to answer, her reply was, ‘Yes, because I was heartsore, that is why I did it’. (“Heartsore np)

This is all that has been documented regarding her testimony. Christiansë continues to mention that

[i]ronically, the Orphan Chamber’s report uses statements attributed to Sila as

moments in which she *did not* articulate a claim to freedom. These are used to vindicate the Orphan Chamber of any responsibility for the fact that Sila never received the freedom for which the widow's will provided. Rather than remembering and enforcing the stipulations of this will, the Orphan Chamber's 1827 report belatedly supports Theron and Hancke, and later, the slave owner with whom Sila eventually lived, Van der Wat, in the District of Plettenberg Bay. ("Heartsore" emphasis added np)

It is unknown whether the three recorded sentences that remain are all that Sila provided regarding her trial. What can be deduced is that this is as far as the court transcribers and colonial archive allowed her voice. The rest is lost. And silent.

The act of "looking sideways", or reading the granularity of the archive, necessitates the allowance for this loss. It is not an attempt at filling the silence, but rather at providing a "stencil" for it; that is, a shape, or comprehension of an understanding that cannot be filled in. Christiansë notes that "[w]ith rare exceptions, the bureaucratic record acknowledges almost nothing beyond the fact of slaves' existence, and sometimes their repudiations of the conditions of their lives. Yet in detail, their lives, daily trials, and hopeful desires are utterly absent ("Heartsore" np) and that we "can't know the lives of those slaves in South Africa" (Christiansë in Smiley). As Hamilton et al. put it, "[w]hat was left out cannot simply be put back in" (Hamilton et al. 12). To "look sideways", therefore, is to address the absences and silences in the archive, to "pay attention to the silence", read the gaps and omissions and fight the "impulse to nail everything down, deliver the information" (Christiansë in Smiley). These gaps and omissions *need* to stay silent, or unfilled, in order to do service to those who were oppressed in and under history for it is possible that the silence itself speaks; and speaks more audibly.

### 3.3. The Strategic and the Tragic: The Choice of Historical Fiction as Genre

*Unconfessed*, in contrast to the linear romance emplotment in *The Slave Book*, conveys a more seamless integration of fact and fiction. Here, historical references and factual data are carefully conveyed through Sila's focalisation. In so doing, Christiansë allows history to delicately perforate her narrative. Instances of this are evident when we have Sila tell us that "[s]he stepped into the square whitewashed room and there she saw the warden standing beside his desk, the superintendent seated at it, and her advokaat, Van Ryneveld, seated in the only other chair in the room" (Christiansë 22). Further down, we are told that "[a]ll those years ago [Sila] had learned that Van Ryneveld, although not a bad man, loved fighting the



farmers of the outlands more than he cared about her” (Christiansë 22). It would be credible to accept that the Van Ryneveld mentioned in the novel is that of the historical Willem Stephanus van Ryneveld, who was appointed Fiscal of the Cape Colony in December 1793. The subtle mention of Van Ryneveld’s contestation with the wine farmers refers to the growing unease of slave owners pending the British abolition of the slave trade in 1808 and subsequently in its colonies some decades later. Van Ryneveld was responsible for implementing a pass system for slaves and owners to appease unrest, which he consciously mismanaged. The historical reference to Van Ryneveld scattered throughout this section is seamlessly woven into the fictional plot. I favour Christiansë’s technique concerning the reproduction of historical information, as narrative flow is not constantly interrupted. Moreover, Sila’s suggestive narration appropriates the archive in a successful and striking manner. Thus, instead of referring directly to history, Christiansë allows Sila to allude to it, sensitively and poignantly.

Elsewhere, in the same section, Christiansë draws on verbatim court documents in her depiction of the extenuating circumstances concerning Sila’s pardon. Once again, the official historical information is entwined effortlessly into her narrative consciousness as we are first told that “[Sila] had heard the language of the court before. The ‘whereas a female slave named Sila’ was not new” (Christiansë 22): we are also presented with a direct excerpt from official letters of correspondence between Cape Colony officials and the Colonial office in London. The mention of the “the language of the court” therefore pre-empts and qualifies the verbatim quotation so as to inform the reader of the nature of its origin, without adopting an instructing tone. Thus, Sila reflects that

[h]er life was being summed up in that same language that said how she was:  
 ‘At a Court of Justice holden in and for our Colony of the Cape of Good Hope and its Dependencies on Wednesday the 30th Day of April, 1823, Tried and Convicted of Murder, and had Sentence of Death passed upon her for the same...’.(Christiansë 23)

The words read by Van Ryneveld originate from the official letter of correspondence between acting Governor Bourke and London, discovered by Christiansë in the Cape archive and implemented in her narrative. While Christiansë fictionally changes the author of the letter to Baron Konrad de Laurentz, appointed as the new superintendent of police in 1826 and referred to in the opening of the novel, the excerpt is produced verbatim. Similarly to *The Slave Book*, *Unconfessed*’s narrative incorporates historical and archival data in its presentation of actual historical events, yet Christiansë conveys these in a more succinct manner. This is due to the gradual and delicate references to the facts. Christiansë allows the

history to emerge from the narration almost naturally. Following the excerpt previously cited, we are told that,

[t]hat much was old, over three years old, but strange words came from Van Ryneveld's mouth now.

'I, Baron Konrad de Laurentz, in consideration of some extenuating circumstances of her having been allowed from some neglect...'

The warden started to say something, but the superintended held a hand up.

Van Ryneveld looked from one to the other over the rims of his spectacles, inhaled and continued reading: '...from some neglect or other to linger in prison for three and a half years with a sentence of death hanging over her head, and to demean herself during that time in a manner little calculated to prepare her for another world...'

What was this? This language was like too much cream on the top of milk – pretty, tasty, but even with the first taste it was making you sick. Her head was spinning. She wanted to shake her fist at them and shout, Just tell me...Death, or not death!

'I humbly petition His Gracious Majesty on her behalf to Extend Your Grace and Mercy...and grant her Your Pardon...'. (Christiansë 23)

Once again, the reader is presented with verbatim archival information intertwined with Sila's stream of consciousness. Christiansë therefore interrupts portions of historical data in the narrative and significantly renders it fragmented. The fragmentation is not only caused by Sila's focalisation but is typographically presented in the spaces in between each excerpt from De Laurentz's letter, and the ellipses at the end of each quote. The forthcoming section discusses Christiansë's use of typography to convey silence and the various natures of these silences; the fragmentation is, once again, significant here. Here, Sila's consciousness interrupts the historical information; or rather, the archive as presented in the novel, that thereby allows her voice to emerge. Ironically, contrary to the silencing of her voice within the colonial archive with the abundance of litigation, judgement, indictment and proceedings prioritised above the documentation of her own testimony, in *Unconfessed* it is Sila who silences the archive.

To return to White's discussion of historical emplotment, the sensitive, succinct utilisation of historical data inherent in Christiansë's narrative style, as discussed above, reflects the tragedy mode of historical emplotment as identified by White. To White, this mode "stresses the irreconcilable element of human affairs, and laments the loss of the good necessarily entailed when values collide" (*Metahistory* 95). When read in comparison to the

romance mode which “celebrates the triumph of the good after trials and tribulations” (White, *Metahistory* 95) the difference between Christiansē’s and Jacobs’s authorial stance regarding the representation of the historical period of the Cape Colony and the slavocratic institution, becomes clear. Christiansē’s inscription of the tragedy mode presents Sila’s narrative in what White describes as approaching “the culmination of an action, carried out with a specific intention, from the standpoint of the agent who sees deployed before him a world which is at once a means and an impediment to the realization of his purpose” (*Metahistory* 95). To Sila, her purpose is to be a mother, which, to her, is cursed by being a slave. As the novel closes, Sila laments,

[t]he daughters and sons of my generations will say, we are not people, we are things. The sons of my generations will say, we are men made of rock and it is our natures to throw ourselves against all enemies until their skin breaks. I fear for the daughters of my generations for, with such fathers, there will be no home. I fear for the sons of their generations for, with such fathers, there will be no goodness. And I will be weeping in my grave ... And I will be wisps of grief myself, forgotten, hungering after other people’s children, for my children will be running behind me, forgotten too as their children’s children, those rocks who were once people, smash and smash some terrible future into shape. (Christiansē 344)

She sees her tragic position as slave and mother as giving birth to future generations of slaves that are subordinated as things and are therefore denied any human, moral existence. Thus, Christiansē presents the slavocratic world in which Sila is cast as forcing her tragic action, the *kindermoord*, to simultaneously impede and realise her position as mother. To Sila, her act of *kindermoord* keeps Baro safe, it protects him from pain, and acts in his best interest – it is being a mother. Yet, at the same time, taking his life overrides her position as the one who gave life. Aware of the fate that awaits her because of her crime, Sila is cast as the tragic heroine, and informs the reader that she undertakes to

live up to this, what has been demanded of me. It does not matter who has demanded it. All that matters is that I am the one who knows that something has been demanded of her and I am the one who understands that there is no escape in refusing to answer. (Christiansē 348)

As her words echo across the final pages of the novel and then finally disappear, the reader is compelled to look at the world deployed before her, the institution which provoked her actions, and the fate Sila was forced to accept.

The use of tragedy mode in *Unconfessed* is emphatic. In comparison to *The Slave*

*Book's* romance mode, which constitutes a dualistic nature consisting of a mere “interchange between the forces of vice and those of virtue – between tyranny and justice, hate and love” (“White, *Metahistory* 150), the position of Sila as tragic heroine allows for a more mindful and perceptive engagement with the significance of slavocracy and its implications during this historical period.

### 3.4. ‘The Mute Always Speak’: A Register of Resistance

*How does one approach that place where a woman “remains”, the place from which, as Spivak describes, speech may emanate but not to be heard, a place in which the muted being is relegated to a position that she must try to make her body signify. – Christiansë (“Heartsore”)*

In her work on women’s testimonies at the TRC, Nthabiseng Motsemme explores the painful silences encountered in declarations of victimisation and violence. She asks, “what happens when those who have been denied the occasion to tell their stories, and whose bodies and cultures have been systematically violated and dehumanized, discover that there are things that remain unspeakable?” (“The Mute” 915). To Motsemme, silence manifests itself in these spaces, not as an oppressive entity, but as spaces where new meanings can be mined amidst an inability for expression. Christiansë comments that “[i]n these circumstances, one must learn how to listen to echoes of subjects for whom one might not have an adequate language; one must also learn how to discern what they might have been trying to say within the statements attributed to them (but that could very well represent the redactions of colonial officials—notaries, court reporters)” (“Heartsore” np). Alternatively, silence can be read as expressing a variety of nuances that articulate agency as opposed to submission. Here, we have “silence as resistance and courage; silence as illusion of stability; and silence as a site for coping and the reconstitution of self” (Motsemme, “The Mute” 910). It is in this reading of silence that one can “approach that place where a woman ‘remains’”, the place from which, as Spivak describes, speech may emanate but not to be heard, a place in which the muted being is relegated to a position that she must try to make her body signify” (Christiansë, “Heartsore” np).. However, “[i]n addition, one must prepare to hear and interpret any echo of the unsaid as something that could be nothing more than a trace (Christiansë, “Heartsore” np). In the archive, this silent trace is made palpable through Sila’s utterance of “hartseer”. For, ironically, if she is silenced yet allowed this one word, it subversively emphasises the fact that she is silenced and therefore speaks.

Sila's disempowerment is represented in the scant information available to us in the archive. Accordingly, Christiansë reflects these omissions in her narrative, but transforms these silences to present a chosen register of resistance to criminality, slavery and representation. It is in the act of her slitting Baro's throat, and Christiansë's refusal to "fill in" the details that we find a (silent) act that speaks. This silence expands to an act of resistance to slavery, to being inscribed with and within subordinate ideology and one that transforms Sila's silenced voice to a silent one, which comes to speak inside of colonial discourse.

In this silence of what Sila "could not say", Christiansë shows how "silence within a violent everyday can also become a site for reconstituting 'new' meanings and can become a tool of enablement for those oppressed" (Motsemme, "The Mute" 917). In her words, "I could not say as *they wanted me to say*" (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 242 emphasis added) and the act of kindermoord is consequently embedded in silence. Christiansë gestures towards the denial of slave articulation by colonial government institutions and shows how the absence is reflected in the archive. She states that,

[i]n the Cape Colony, then, the slave's articulation of the 'I'—as the subject of freedom, who says 'I can'—was limited to government institutions (such as the courts) but only in extreme cases of abuse or as defendants against accusation. It was in this sense that Sila's criminality was negatively recognized by the law and consigned to colonialism's record. It was in this sense that she laid her claim to a will limited by and to negation. ("Heartsore np)

If, according to Motsemme's argument, "instead of being absent and voiceless, silences in circumstances of violence assume presence and speak volumes" ("Memories in silence", 5), this presence is made even more palpable by what she does say: "hartseer". It is because she is "hartseer" that she slit Baro's throat in order to save him. It is in this "hartseer" act that she "attempts to summon the law as a full subject might summon it, to question and not merely answer, to speak and not only confirm what has been heard [for] had she died a slave rather than a killer of a slave, she would never have achieved visibility" (Christiansë, "Heartsore" np). The silent hauntedness of this word, and what it comes to mean in the archive, is cast in the form of Baro's "spectral presence" (Samuelson "Castaways") in the novel.

### 3.4.1 Resistance

The text conveys these silences in many ways. The most noticeable and perhaps most important silence is gestured to in the title – "Unconfessed", and surrounds the kindermoord

of Sila's son, Baro. This silence, "unconfession", or "that which is not said" refers to the expected admittance of Sila's guilt for the murder of her son; however, as the title suggests, the exact detail of the act remains absent from the novel, and there is never a verbatim claim that she had slit Baro's throat. Meg Samuelson mentions that the subsequent withdrawal from a represented confession in the novel inevitably draws the reader's curiosity to ask, "what stays 'unconfessed'?" and later, hopefully, "why?" (*Castaways* 18). Instead, Sila only alludes to "that day..." (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 312), suggesting Baro's "spectral presence" on Robben Island. "You know your mother would grab the edge of a blade for you? You know your mother would cut off her right hand to save you? And you know you are dearer to me than my own right hand?" (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 265). It is therefore up to the reader to complete the ellipses and make the associative connections in the metaphorical language she uses. Even in the description leading right up to the plot event itself, Sila never confesses to actual murder. Instead she states,

I put Pieter [her child] to sleep and then I took some fat from our bread and rubbed it on Baro's legs where the hide had left marks. And then I saw the big bruises on his stomach. I rubbed fat on them too [...] I rubbed the fat in and he did not even cry. He went to sleep. I put him on my lap and he went into a sleep that saved him. (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 313 emphasis added)

Once again, Christiansë does not fulfil the superficial reader's desire for sensation by delivering every detail of the murder. Instead, Sila's metaphorical reference to the kindermoord as the "sleep that saved him", along with the accompanying ellipses, invites the reader to draw out the titular implications of "unconfessing" or "that which is not said", that which remains omitted or kept silent. By presenting Sila as "an unconfessing character [...], her refusal to account for her deed [marks] her subversive resistance to her inscription in the colonial archive" (Samuelson, *Castaways* 1-2) as only slave, murderer and "bad woman" – therefore a muted being denied of agency and voice. As Samuelson suggests, "in the absence of confession, we are asked to consider how kindermoord as archival trace and literary trope functions in this text. In what ways does this unspeakable, unconfessed act speak, and what might it articulate?" (*Castaways* 16). Therefore, in turn, this inevitably excites the reader's curiosity to ask, "what" stays 'unconfessed'?" and finally, "why"?

Initially, the infanticide exemplifies the conditions and hardships of slavery, which led a mother to kill her child. As a result, Sila questions the nature of motherhood as a slave and asks herself countless times, "[h]ow many times had she felt this uselessness? How many times had a child of hers cried and how many times had she not been allowed to be the mother she should have been?" (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 23). In the light of Sila's anguish over the

futility of a motherhood which would only allow her children to lead a life of suffering, to be sold for hard labour in order to profit another, the omission of Sila's confession is important, for in the absence of an allowed voice, this act, in turn, speaks. While Baro's murder is obviously a crime; the act of kindermoord itself goes beyond legislative criminality. To the court, "[a]t issue was the question of maternal nature, even in the case of a slave woman who would not have been considered in the same (human) light as a white woman" (Christiansë, "Heartsore" np).

Instead, what Sila does confess to right at the end of the novel is not infanticide, but as having "been the most guilty of all", for as mother, she has failed her children and their children to come, by allowing them to be born into slavocracy and failing to keep its repercussions from them. The infanticide functions, not only as device to keep Sila's children from the sufferings and the kind of life she had to endure, but to expose "the violence of the law that proclaimed Sila (and her generations) to be the property of others, casting her womb as a tomb for generations of 'living dead'" (Samuelson, *Castaways* 18). Sila laments that she "saw them [her children] and their generations chained to each other in a line that went right up into that land, over mountains, through rivers. I felt my body as if it was giving birth to generations already dead" (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 304). Sila confesses not to the murder of her son, but to the genealogy of slavery which is to follow from her womb. Thus the kindermoord speaks of "Sila's ongoing struggle against that condition" (Samuelson, *Castaways* 11). Sila tells us,

I could not say as they wanted me to say. That I had taken my boy. Cruelly?  
Or even that I had loved him and held him on my lap when he at last cried himself to sleep. I could not say that the hand that stole the knife shook, or that I had lifted my dear boy onto my lap and held him, and had stroked him and known that he was already beyond all of them, even me. And that there was no hope, already, long before I stroked my boys throat, that he would not sleep in the ground for three days and rise again to tell me that I had made him greater than all of them. (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 242)

### 3.5. A Silence that Speaks: A Narrative Strategy

Baro's presence on the island is a manifestation of Sila's guilt, yet simultaneously a continual haunting of the genealogy of slavery that she tried to resist. Significantly, Baro keeps silent. He is as unwilling and unable to respond as Sila is to the interrogators of the court. It is to Baro that Sila opens up and relates her thoughts, reflections and feelings of guilt and in which



the narrative strategy of the novel is formed.

### 3.5.1 The Refusal To Describe

Significantly, the novel avoids taking any direct narrative agency regarding the facts of Sila's life. While the impetus to any historical novel is fact, the facts surrounding Sila's existence all point towards her subordination and a stripping away of her agency. Consequently, a conventional and strictly factual re-telling of her story might serve to focus on, if not re-affirm, the kinds of subordination she was forced to undergo, and sensationalise them. Yet, Sila's story happened. It is fact. It is history. And the factual elements of her past cannot be re-written. Therefore, any engagement with this historical past needs to engage with the archive as well and more specifically, with the representational nature of the facts found there. Mindful of "Spivak's caution against imbuing the written word with the aura of absent presence is a salutary reminder of the risk of wanting to rewrite history, not only nostalgically but also sentimentally" Christiansē states that "[w]e cannot "recover" Sila. What remains is that which was and still is in excess of the law and, indeed, in excess of her. This excess is suggested in the utterance that echoes in a single word, the word that comes to us as a transliteration of the Dutch "hartzeer." ("Heartsore np). She had to "give up one of those sort of lovely, filling strategies, which was description" (Christiansē in Smiley), avoiding the need to "nail everything down" and thus rendered the text filled with silences.

These silences show both the author's and the protagonist's unwillingness to engage with discourse from a subjugated position, which a word-for-word factual account would do. Instead, Christiansē opens up spaces of silence within the text, reflective of the silence found within the archive, in which the subjugated position of the slave as colonial other can be cast anew as having narrative agency. While the archive fills Sila's narrative with silence, Christiansē employs these silences as active responses to the ideological discourse which would ironically be perpetuated through its factual articulation. The silences within *Unconfessed* are a chosen register of resistance to criminalisation, slavery and representation. By allowing Sila to remain silent, and more importantly, to engage with this silence, Christiansē imbues her character with agency. This silent voice is conveyed in Sila's fragmented narration as first-person narrator and forms the most extensive silence in the novel.

### 3.5.2. Spaces On A Page

Typographically, fragments that comprise Sila's narration are separated by spaces on the page, which indicate temporal shifts and therefore the achronological nature of Sila's narration. I suggest that one reads these spaces as ultimately transformed into spaces of silence, for no indication of thematic association is given between different fragments, and it is up to the reader to interpret these silences and make sense of each segment. Furthermore, while chapters appear in coherent sequence, they are not numbered and cannot therefore be "officially" ordered into any linear sequence. Instead, the silences in the plot, significantly, reflect Christiansē's own discovery of the silences surrounding the historical Sila's existence as archival trace and presents her narrative to us in a similar disjointed manner. Each fragment contains a narrative event, which in turn is broken down or interrupted by Sila's consciousness relating a distant memory or her conversation with her deceased son Baro. This disjointment has two effects. Firstly, Christiansē subverts history's logical and coherent linearity which confines Sila into a subjugated position, in favour of a narrative style that resembles the segments of her broken life. The reader, like Christiansē, is forced to "look sideways", to fill in the silences left in the narrative as no causality for plot events is offered. Secondly, this disjointed structure opens a space in which Sila's constant reminiscing again conveys narrative interiority.

This interiority is presented to the reader typographically as well. As mentioned, Sila functions as first-person narrator for the largest part of the novel. By allowing her to tell her own story, agency is granted to her as she assumes the role of narrator, and in a sense author, of her own life. By granting her authorial power, and rendering her in control of that which she chooses to relate, Sila is granted agency. To a certain extent Sila is, perhaps for the first time, in control of her own identity as she chooses her method of representation.

### 3.5.3 An Interior Voice

The novel opens with a section narrated by an unknown third-person narrator, possibly the same voice that also ends the novel:

He stood just in the entrance of the cell, a tall man with his hat in his hands.  
 She could make out the cream of his necktie. She knew why he had come.  
 She waited and could see him struggle with irritation and uncertainty as she remained seated on the bed [...] She knew about him. The very famous superintendent about whom everyone talked. Once, when she was out in the

yard, he had come clattering to visit the warden. She had been invisible except as one of those people he had been so good at keeping obedient.

(Christiansē, *Unconfessed* 7)

Here, the identities of the narrator and the focalisor (presumably Sila) are unknown as no mention is made of proper names. While some information regarding the identity of the “he” is presented through reference to the “very famous superintendent”, the anonymity of these characters is largely preserved through the use of the pronouns “he” and “she”, while the reader is mysteriously placed in the context of the prison cell. Later, a guard refers to the “he” as “Excellency” (Christiansē, *Unconfessed* 7), shedding further light on the possible identity of this character, while any information regarding the identity of the “she” stays omitted. While the mention of words such as “cell”, “warden” and “guard” informs us that “she” is a prisoner, presumably in a goal cell, no concrete signifier of identity is provided other than that of “prisoner”. And as this is the only information concerning the focalisor’s identity available to us at present, it is difficult to read her position as one being anything other than subjugated. Further descriptions concerning her extended circumstances confirm this. Previously “invisible” to the superintendent while out in the yard of the gaol he now looks at her “as if she were a fool” (Christiansē, *Unconfessed* 7). Furthermore, as “sanitation is a problem” (Christiansē, *Unconfessed* 7) in the cell, she is forced to sleep on urine soaked straw, along with Meisie, the child she bore in gaol. These descriptions of the focalisor, accompanied by the sparse information already presented to us, seemingly establish nothing else but her subordination.

However, the frequent shifts into free-indirect speech emphasises the interiority of the character and allows a subversion as it provides the focalisor with a measure of agency. The repeated use of “she”, only near the end of the page identified and referred to as “Sila”, immediately establishes the interiority of the protagonist we will later come to know as Sila van den Kaap, as no focus can be placed on any exterior description of the character. All that we have are her interior thoughts and ponderings. Unlike Baron Konrad de Laurentz, the newly appointed Superintendent of Police, referred to as “he”, we are not told in simple narrative action what she does, who she is, and why she is captured. Instead, we are told what she thinks. We are told that De Laurentz “turned abruptly to face the guard who remained invisible on the other side of the doorframe” (Christiansē, *Unconfessed* 7). In contrast, all of Sila’s focalisations are interior and is antithetically placed against the conventional narrative descriptions of not only De Laurentz, but as is later discovered, all of the characters in the novel. In addition, she analyses, appraises and comments on everything that she hears and perceives. This means that not only do we have access to Sila’s interiority, but that we also

see others externally and probe their interiors through her eyes. For example when De Laurentz exclaims “[c]hild? What child?” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 7) after being told that Meisie, her baby, is in goal with her, Sila responds that

[s]he understood his surprise. How on earth could she have been here all this time, under their noses, and not be noticed, she and her child, the one she called Meisie despite the name they wanted her to use? How could they have forgotten about her, forgotten. (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 8)

Significantly, Sila’s response shows her ability to analyse, appraise and understand the other character’s thoughts and emotions. In contrast to De Laurentz’s actual spoken words, she internally replies on his behalf that “she understood his surprise” and continues to show this understanding of the reason for his shocked response. Sila then continues to state that “he [De Laurentz] could not bring himself to ask these questions, they would have exposed his ignorance, and a great superintendent of order could never admit to such a thing” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 8). Her response shows not only an appraisal of De Laurentz’s character but an analysis of his actions as well. She understands why De Laurentz refrains from further inquiries into her condition and rather keeps silent. Furthermore, she understands that his authoritative figure, and therefore his power, is a direct result of his seeming ability to be in complete control of every situation. The measure of understanding and awareness that is shown in Sila’s interiority as focaliser presents her as a thinking subject: the antithesis of the way that the archive represents her.

In addition, the narrator in this opening section is concerned with Sila’s emotions, thoughts and observations to such an extent that the narrative style starts to resemble an “Austenique” free indirect discourse, where her thoughts and reflections become tangled with, and take on, the tone of the narrator’s, making it easy to mistake the one for the other. When De Laurentz demands “[w]hat have you (Sila) to say for yourself?” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 8), her response is to keep quiet and think to herself that

[h]is accent was so stupid. She lay back and laughed, drawing her skirt up. This was how they liked it, filthy and stinking. He should know that, superintendent of cleanliness and order. The naaimeidjie was here. Yes, he should know who and what this place had made of her in all these years she had been forgotten. (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 8)

Here, it is Sila’s opinion or thought, with her as focaliser, that is presented to us in the first sentence. The second sentence takes a more neutral or conventional narrative tone, describing

her action in order to move the plot forward and is very clearly the narrator's voice. However, the following statement that "[t]his was how they liked it, filthy and stinking" (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 8) contains a mixture of narrative tones. This sentence could easily be interpreted as either the omniscient narrator's statement or Sila's thought, presented by the narrator, but with her as focaliser. Therefore, despite this section being presented by a third-person narrator, Sila's thoughts interrupt and colour the narration as her presence as focaliser continues to infiltrate the narration. In fact, this foreshadows her position as first-person narrator, which will occupy the largest part of the novel. This merging of tone and narrative voice establishes Sila's interiority and with it her agency and seems to be one such attempt at giving voice to those who were previously silenced, such as slaves. While this is most noticeably done during the largest section of the novel when Sila functions as sole focaliser and narrator, the fact that these narrative tendencies are starting to emerge foreshadows her eventual role as narrator. Furthermore, her agency is also presented in her refusal to be spoken for. Thus, we find her thoughts starting to infiltrate the narrative consciousness with her own, almost grappling with it, refusing to allow a more conventional narrative construct.

If Sila's interior monologue consistently infiltrates the narrator's telling, then why include this third-person narrator at all? If agency were to be attributed to the character would it not be deemed fitting for the entire novel to be presented with Sila as narrator? Another answer could be that the third-person narrator(s) that begin(s) and end(s) Sila's story serve as commentary on the nature of her historical existence in the archive. According to Christiansë, South Africa does not have a tradition of slave narratives as is found in America. "[o]ne of the reasons for that is that the colonial office so controlled the printing press, certainly till the late 1830s, that there was no chance for slaves to develop a literary voice, a written voice" (Christiansë in Smiley). The only information available to Christiansë on the historical Sila van den Kaap, then, is what was documented in the court records relating to her trial and in the correspondence regarding her constant re-sale among her various owners and the word "hartseer". In a sense, this means that the only type of representation available for Sila's voice is one that is done by someone speaking on her behalf, or speaking for her. The inclusion of the third-person narrator indicates awareness that Sila has no historical voice. Someone else is always telling her story.

Significantly, then, if one regards the beginning and end of *Unconfessed* in this light, as reflective of the historical traces of Sila van den Kaap left in the archive, and their representational nature, then the majority of the novel, wedged between these traces, represents Christiansë's act of "looking sideways" at what these spaces could possibly mean, and say. Therefore at the end of the novel Sila's voice abruptly vanishes from the narrative.

Instead, the novel ends with a mysterious third-person narrator who provides the reader with five possible endings to Sila's story, each portraying her as aloof and as silent as the various traces of her name that is found in the colonial archive. Not only is the length of time that passed between this final section and the previous one unclear, but the indefinite "some say" with which each of these endings is introduced rejects any notion of a concrete linear ending to Sila's narrative and instead her story is left to continue in silence.

Sila, as first-person narrator, has two voices with different levels of intimacy. On one level we have her narrative voice, relating, but never detailing, her life as a slave. The tone of this voice is a mixture of conventional narrative action and a type of confession. Significantly, Baro himself is a silent figure as he never speaks, but is merely spoken to. In this sense intimacy and interiority is suggested in her narration. This is presented to the reader in the different levels of narration that Sila takes on and that differs typographically on the page. Sila has a deeper narrative voice which she does not share with Baro, or anyone else. Only the reader has insight into this part of her narration. These segments are printed in italics, to indicate the shift between narrative perspective and along with it, intimacy. For example, Sila directs the following to Baro: "[s]tay here and let me tell you what is to be seen. Let me see you" (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 44).

Of course, Baro does not answer her and she is forced to reflect that "[y]ou have no idea what things have happened to me" (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 44). This thought, printed in italics, is Sila's deepest intimate thought and is presented to the reader directly, allowing us insight to her deepest consciousness. Elsewhere, Sila tells Baro, "[t]here we were, rocking in the boat and your sister went quiet with her eyes big, but still holding my dress in those little fists of hers. I was afraid but I was also laughing. *Better with me in the water than back with Van der Wat*" (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 47).

Once again the level of interiority in the italicised line is much deeper than in the previous ones. Moreover, they seem to suggest some possible insight as to Sila's consciousness surrounding the circumstances of the kindermoord. As we know, she murdered Baro to prevent him from growing up a slave and undergoing the hardship and torture such a life would deliver him into, but we are never presented a full and complete disclosure of her feelings. Instead, fragments of her consciousness emerge in the narrative that suggest the sadness, anger and guilt that she feels. The following stream of consciousness is presented to the reader:

[s]he (Sila), who had summoned death and drawn a space for it in the world through the living throat of her boy, she had no knowledge of what it would be like to feel her life going out of the body that had been her very own

burden in this world. Her stomach trembled.

*What had she done?* (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 21)

The stark intimacy of the italicised line is juxtaposed to the more conventional narrative tone in “her stomach trembled”, allowing Sila’s narrative stream of consciousness to be broken up into fragments by thoughts of deeper interiority. These phrases take an almost retrospective tone, and seem to reflect the “wisest” of Sila’s narrative tones as they present her uninhibited most private and vulnerable thoughts. Furthermore, these thoughts concern themselves with the appraisal and validation of events, rather than pure narrative plot. Sila would narrate that,

[t]he guards stood there with the same ease that a woman holds her baby. The guards stood there the way men do when they are watching the world, lazy hips, one up, maybe a leg raised on a nearby something, or a foot placed back, on a bit of wall, or against a tree on which the man is leaning. That look of their bodies. Watching. And those guns. (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 49)

This narration is immediately followed by an internal, and silent, question asking, “[w]hat kind of people are these?” (49). Once again Sila is presented to us as a thinking subject, one who is able to reason and consider the implications of actions, events and circumstance. Elsewhere, she tells us that on Robben Island,

[v]isitors come to hunt rabbits. Or they come to catch fish. Some days you will get used to this, you hear the laughter of visitors resting on the rocks after a good hunt. The men light pipes. The women sit under parasols. (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 54)

Again, this is followed by the thought asking “*What kind of people are these?*” Presented in these italicised lines are Sila’s reflections on the actions of those who have rendered her a prisoner and slave. In both instances, the matter-of-fact tone with which she describes the actions of the guards and the visitors on the island is juxtaposed with her inner thought, commenting on the humanity of it all, and by implication the entire system of slavocracy that has affected her life. Her descriptions, ironically, or perhaps sarcastically, emphasise the supposed humanity of their actions. The guards hold their guns like a woman would hold a baby. Visitors come to Robben Island to fish, hunt and laze under parasols. They laugh and are clearly happy and carefree. All of these descriptions are natural, every day and nonchalant. However, with Sila’s comment that follows, asking what kind of people these were, causes one to revisit their description and reflect on why she would say this. Significantly, she never details any of the horrible things done; instead, her comment implies that these are horrible people through its antithetical position. And the meaning lies in the contradiction to which it points. The carefree temperament of the guards and visitors is juxtaposed with the implied



inhumanity of their actions; that they are able to relax and have fun while people are being forced into slavery, raped in gaol and beaten. Sila does not say this in so many words, for slaves had no voice with which they could accuse. Even more so, while Sila is represented as remaining silent, we still “hear” her thoughts, to which the reader has privileged access. Therefore in the absence of detail the reader is forced to once again “look sideways” and reflect on why Sila makes this comment, what does her comment reveals or implies.

#### 3.5.4 Meta-Narrative

Interestingly, Baro’s silent presence on the island also opens a space in which Sila’s constant reminiscing not only provides interiority to the narration but conveys an awareness of the act of narration itself. Sila states that “[t]he sky gets that look again. Well! Let all the ships sink! *Is it good or bad to say such things?*” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 196).

The deeper interiority, printed in italics, shows a reflection on the previous statement. This indicates commentary on Sila’s part, on her own narration, and forms asides, either to herself or to Baro, which in turn conveys awareness that she is engaging in fictional representation. Furthermore, this act of self-engagement allows her to, in the spaces of silence, re-neogtiate a new identity concerning her subjugated existence. The final two chapters in the novel with Sila as narrator see her address herself, which she would only be able to do if she were aware of the fact that she was narrating all along. It is due to this meta-narrative aspect to the novel, in which Sila is aware of and engages with the underlying issues of narration and agency, that she is able to step out of her role as narrator and address the entity that has been narrating.

Moreover, Baro’s silence introduces a discursive space in which Sila is forced to answer the questions she poses to him. Baro’s presence on the island functions, not only as the haunting for the murder Sila has committed, but more importantly, as a space in which she enters into a dialogue with herself. In turn, this leads to a discussion surrounding the implications and meaning of her actions, the circumstances leading up to the infanticide and the repercussions of the legacy of slavocracy. This discussion finally allows Sila to achieve a state of self-awareness where she is able to confess, not to the infanticide, but to allowing the colonisers and slave masters, the “vuilgoed”, to possess her, ultimately resulting in a confrontation with herself. This act of self-engagement allows her to renegotiate a new identity in the spaces of silence; a new identity concerning her subjugated existence and by addressing the colonial reproduction of her name, Sila also engages with the ideological discourse forced upon her.

It is here, close to the end of the novel, before (un)confessing, that Sila addresses herself stating, “And now? Keep quiet? Well, Sila van den Kaap, it is time we faced each other. Yes” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 345). With these words Sila shows an acute awareness that she herself is a narrating agent and is therefore in control of what she says, and how it is said. Sila steps out of her role as narrator and addresses the colonial production of her name, Sila van den Kaap, which, significantly, “keep[s] quiet”. Once again, she addresses herself, stating, “[l]et me be strong now. Sila, whoever Sila is, wherever she has come from. I am telling you, be strong. This might be all there is, of necessity, but all there is could be less still” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 349). In these moments of self-splitting and self-conscious narration, Sila engages with the ideological discourse forced upon her and subverts her passive subject position as colonial product by actively engaging and confronting it. Furthermore, this acknowledgement of her colonial identity and her subsequent confrontation with it, finally allows Sila to confess – not to the kindermoord but to allowing the “vuilgoed”, or colonisers and slave masters, to possess her. She confesses to Baro that she has “been the most guilty of all” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 348) in “giving birth to generations already dead” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 304).

When Sila utters “I, Sila van den Kaap, I dare to say things that confuse me in a language that has been given me and which strangles all other language, even the language in which my own name lived” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 348), she confesses not to the murder of her son but to the genealogy of slavery which is to follow from her womb, and of which she deems herself guilty of reproducing. Claiming her colonial name, Sila van den Kaap, changed from Sila van Mozbiek, and using the colonial tongue, she confesses to being a colonial product, a subjugated other who has been stripped from any native form of identity and has learned to conform to colonial expectations.

However, a confession of this colonial identity pre-supposes an awareness of it. The fact that she addresses and confronts this colonial reproduction of herself indicates not only a thinking subject, but one with agency as well, specifically with regards to the construction and negotiation of her identity. Thus Christiansë comments in an interview that one of the necessities regarding Sila’s identity that she wanted to highlight in the novel is that “here’s a woman who comes out of slavery and she says, “[a]in’t I a woman’?”...one of the key things is you have to see me as is a woman. That’s part of her identity” (Christiansë in Smiley). In the novel, when asked whether she can confirm that she is “Sila van den Kaap, slave to the burgher Jacobus Stephanus van der Wat” (Christiansë, *Unconfessed* 8), she keeps silent, refusing to respond to the term “slave”. Instead, she thinks to herself, “Slave? Who was he calling slave?” De Laurentz repeats his question asking whether she is “the woman who came

from Van der Wat?” and Sila responds “From Van der Wat, yes” (Christiansē, *Unconfessed*, 8). Elsewhere, she tells him, “I am Sila who was taken from Cape Town to Van der Wat” (Christiansē, *Unconfessed* 9). Significantly Sila does not respond to the term slave, but acknowledges reference to her as a person as she refers to herself as Sila, the person who was sold, not the slave. Moreover, she presents this representation in the passive voice, “I was taken” and conveys in this mode the state of “powerlessness” and victimisation that this violent act describes. Discursively, this mode reveals the “oppressive hierarchy” inherent in her constituents of “slave” and “woman”.

Elsewhere she states, “I am Sila, friend and lover to Lys, mother to children who carry the weight of the world on their faces” (Christiansē, *Unconfessed* 339). Once more all the references to herself are references of a personal nature first; “woman”, “Sila”, “friend and lover”, “Mother”, indicating that there is more to her being, more to her identity than “slave”. Only then does she state, “I am Sila, prisoner – yes, I can say it, I can speak that language of yours ... I am prisoner of George who does not come to this island to see how powerful his word is” (Christiansē, *Unconfessed* 339). The antithetical placement of “prisoner” after the terms and labels that precede it, indicates the corroding damage colonialism and slavocracy did to Sila’s identity.

More importantly, this is once again merely gestured to and implied through the arrangement of the fragments in Sila’s narration. Quoting Ingrid de Kok, Meg Samuelson mentions that “Christiansē does not write Sila into a role as spokesperson for women slaves imprisoned in the 1800s. Indeed, she meticulously avoids the metaphysics of voice, offering us instead a genealogy of the slave subject, and a presentation of Sila’s ongoing struggle against that condition” (*Castaways* 12). Thus, Sila’s voice is presented to us in a fragmented and suggestive fashion, filled with silence in order to subvert history’s strong logical coherent linearity, exactly that which confines Sila to a subjugated position. Instead, the reader, like Christiansē, is forced to “look sideways”, to read the silences left in the narrative. They are an act of resilience in the face of the colonial ideology which imprisoned Sila in a life of servitude and subordination, and which would have been perpetuated had Christiansē factually simulated Sila’s life. Through this self-conscious reflection on Sila’s part, through her self-awareness of the act of narration, she is able to exploit this. By addressing herself as Sila van den Kaap, Sila engages with the ideological discourse forced upon her, subverting her passive subject position as colonial Other and transforming it into a state of agency.

### 3.6 Conclusion

*It is a bitter gratitude that binds us to her now. Even so, she remains largely unknowable, the bearer of unbearable knowledge, the keeper of secrets, including, most powerfully, the meaning of a word that erupts in testimony, the word “hartzeer”- Christiansë (“Heartsore”).*

The silence to be found in *Unconfessed* is indicative of Christiansë’s act of “looking sideways”, of writing a narrative about a slave woman without superimposing the position of the subordinate onto her once again. Christiansë states that she did not want to write a completely factual account of Sila’s life, opting instead for a factual simulation of a fictional narrative. Nevertheless, this proves to be problematic, as colonial records are either incomplete or biased. This means that presenting a merely factual account of Sila’s slave history would only succeed in perpetuating the already incomplete and ideology-laden discourse.

*Unconfessed*, then, is a product of an active engagement with this problem. By allowing Sila to stay “unconfessed”, Christiansë is able to open spaces of silence in which the subjugated position of the slave as colonial Other can be cast anew with narrative agency. These silences are employed as active responses to the ideological discourse a coherent and linear narrative account would perpetuate. The narrative is therefore fragmented and constantly interrupted with streams of consciousness and memories from the protagonist, severing the linear plot development and rendering it segmented. These segments are separated by spaces, filled with silence, reflecting not only the traces of Sila’s history in the archive and the subsequent silence around it, but resistance to colonial discourse on the part of Sila, for she never supplies details or confesses to her crime. Instead, Christiansë allows Sila to remain silent and more importantly, to actively engage with this silence through an awareness of the representational complexities in her own narration. Consequently, the gaps, omissions, fragments and “unconfessions” that perforate the text open spaces in which Sila’s disempowerment is represented by the sparse information available to us. Christiansë uses these silences to open a space for new negotiation concerning the identity of those defined as subordinate by colonial ideology and imbue them with agency. Finally, the reader is asked to not necessarily fill in the silences left in text but to understand what it might come to express, and more importantly, the need for it (Samuelson, *Castaways*).

## CHAPTER 4

### A COMPARATIVE CONCLUSION

Before I consolidate conclusions, I would like to recount a personal experience in relation to the research conducted for this thesis – an experience that allowed me to become fully cognisant of the importance of slave histories in this country. As I initially set out to conduct research on slavery in South Africa, amidst the many conversations I had with fellow academics and family members interested in my research, I discovered a personal tie in my ancestry to a prominent slave woman, Angela van Bengal.<sup>18</sup> Angela was a slave woman owned by Jan Van Riebeeck and set free in 1675. She married a Dutchman named Arnoldus Willemsz Basson, of whom my mother (née Basson) is a direct descendant. Interestingly, I inherited the name with which I was christened, Maria, from one of their daughters. Intrigued, I began to research Angela's history in order better to understand my own familial ties to her and her lineage. Reading archival documents and registers, I was struck by the negligible information available on her historic presence and I began to understand the almost obsessive need to flesh out the archival information in order to sketch a clear, rounded idea of the person to whom these traces allude. It was only after attending a Basson family reunion fittingly held at the wine estate Nelson's Creek, one of the wine farms Angela owned after she became a freeburgher, that the presence of slave history truly struck me.

It was then that I comprehended the impetus for Jacobs's and Christiansë's novels. I understood the lament for the tragic echoes Christiansë encountered upon her research in the archive as I conducted my own, meagre exploration of the archive. I understood the imaginative journey one's mind takes when confronted with traces of long-lost, forgotten people and the need to bring their history to life and write their stories, stories such as those found in *The Slave Book*. And I understood, as I trod on the soil at Nelson's Creek, that history was buried here, a personal history that tied me to this country in more ways than I had previously grasped.

Spurred on by these realisations, I approached *The Slave Book* and *Unconfessed* with renewed interest, specifically in their depiction of slavocracy and their engagement with the archive and historiography in their representations of this historical past. My motivation for selecting this pair of texts for analysis is the result of their disparate approaches toward representation as novels of historical fiction, the devices incorporated in each, and their

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Angela van Bengal features in Theresa Benade's *Kites of Good Fortunes*.

differing narrative strategies concerning slave subjectivity. Considering Christiansë's expressed difficulty in finding "slave voices" in the archive, as well as the more problematic concern that the articulation of these "voices" within the archive and historiography is always cast within a certain subordinate ideology, *The Slave Book's* and *Unconfesses* distinctly different approaches towards these issues interested me. The central focus of my thesis has therefore been an analysis of each novel's representational techniques and their ability to portray slave subjectivity in diverse ways.

As a romantic work of historical fiction, *The Slave Book* provides a fictionalised account of its characters' existence, drawing on historical data to ground the novel in fact. I read *The Slave Book* as adopting a romance mode of emplotment, both in its presentation of plot and narrative and in its romanticising of historiography. Adopting a strict linear progression, chronological in temporality and conventional in nature, *The Slave Book's* romance plot addresses ideological concerns regarding the institution of slavocracy as the intimacy between a slave and freeburgher gestures towards a humanisation of the Other. As argued in this study, historical fiction blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in an attempt to approach history from previously unexplored perspectives. When the resistance that meets Harman and Somiela's relationship is placed within the colonial context, descriptions of interiority and self-reflection emerge, as the various characters are forced to appraise and criticise the match, offering "glimpses" into imagined moments occluded from history, historiography and the archive. *The Slave Book*, therefore, conveys instances of objective and subjective expression as the narration alternates between the perfunctory delineation of plot actions, and detailed focalisations of the slave characters' interiority.

Divergently, Christiansë's narrative is achronologically presented in fragments, wherein the reader finds and must assemble a disjointed narrative, which contains morsels of coherent narration. These fragments are in turn interrupted by Sila's streams of consciousness, either addressed to Baro's ghost, or to other imagined characters from her past. This fragmented narration strongly resists the coherent and linear structure as presented in *The Slave Book* in favour of a narrative technique that turns away from order and logic. By casting Sila as the narrator and focaliser in the novel, the narration allows for a focus on her consciousness, her interiority and subjectivity; facets of personhood that are largely silenced by discursive practice, and its subsequent documentation in the archive. Both *Unconfessed* and *The Slave Book* are therefore texts with an astute focus on depicting slave interiority. I find that the presentation of slave subjectivity in *Unconfessed* is more successful in its conveyance. Christiansë's use of fragmented and suggestive narration addresses ideological concerns regarding the presentation of slavery. In this, Christiansë's insistence that the

silences surrounding slave voices in the archive – and with it, in my opinion, historiographical practices – be kept silent, is all the more relevant as the silences allow for the injustices of the slavocratic institution to become evident through readerly interpretation. This differs fundamentally from Jacobs’s project of attracting direct attention to the adversity and torment endured by the slave community, by filling the lacunae in the archive and in historiography through representations of interiority.

It is because of this technique that I consider the presentation of subjectivity in *Unconfessed* more effective than in *The Slave Book*. Christiansē’s use of metaphor and fragmentation creates a “silent” language in which she resists “filling the gaps” in the archive, and instead allows the lament for the cruelty and atrocities to echo in the silence. Moreover, the logic and order of historical linearity which confines Sila to a subordinate position is subverted through its disjointed narrative as it conveys the essence of her broken life, as found in the archive.

Clearly then, the archive and historiography exercise an influence in both novels. The novels both incorporate explicit aspects of the archive and historiography, and the differing approaches to this inclusion are most compelling. Recalling Jacobs’s statement that a writer of historical fiction “couldn’t possibly speak on behalf of those early people, and don’t pretend to know what it was like” (*The Slave Book* np), the complexities of representing the past intrigued me. How can authors accurately and sensitively represent the silent voices, but resist “filling the gaps”, and instead presenting them as articulate silences? How does one address these silences and the discursive praxis in the archive and historiography that rendered them so? I argue that Jacobs’s presentation of the “glimpse” into the historical lives of slaves at the Cape Colony is one such attempt at providing an imagined venture into the existence of slave subjectivity. Following White, I identify the constant move from the narratological exterior to interiority in *The Slave Book* as a romanticising of history, as Jacobs draws on historiography and emplots the data in a fictionalised romance mode. That is, consistent with White’s definition of romance emplotment, each chapter in the novel follows the narrative trend in which objective historical data is juxtaposed with subjective portrayals of the factual information and therefore conveys a constant movement between exterior and interior representation.

The historical and factual information are therefore presented both directly and indirectly to the reader as part of the natural narrative flow, and indirectly informs us of the historical context and happenings that form the background to the novel. I read this modulation as Jacobs’s narrative strategy of “glimpsing” at a history, which represents spaces



of movement towards interiority, frequently pertaining to the representation of slave “voices”, narration and subjectivity, all of which are occluded from historiography and the archive.

In comparison, *Unconfessed* uses a similar technique but conveys the integration of fact and fiction seamlessly, and more effectively. Here, historical references and factual data are carefully conveyed through Sila’s focalisation. In contrast to the stark and clinical bouts of information put forward in Jacobs’s novel, Christiansē allows the deliberate permeation of history through her narrative. I find that, in contrast to the historical information presented in *The Slave Book*, Christiansē’s technique here is more acceptable as the fluidity of the narrative is not repeatedly interfered with. Furthermore, while Jacobs attempts to present the historical information through focalisation and therefore allows it, to some extent, to adopt each character’s narrative style, the data encapsulated in the novel protrudes quite obviously from the plot. In contrast, Christiansē appropriates Sila’s narration to the archival information presented in *Unconfessed* more successfully because of her suggestive narration. That is, the history is not directly referred to, as is the case in *The Slave Book*. Instead, Sila alludes, sensitively, to the historical context. Similarly to *The Slave Book*, *Unconfessed*’s narrative incorporates historical and archival data in its presentation of actual historical events, yet Christiansē conveys these in a more succinct manner. This is due to the gradual and delicate references to the facts as opposed to the stark, blatant and almost pedantic nature of representation in *The Slave Book*. Moreover, I find that Jacobs’s method of moving from exterior narrative description to interior focalisations that convey historical information, as previously discussed, breaks the narrative flow and renders the narration somewhat disjunctured. In contrast, Christiansē allows the history to emerge from the narration almost naturally.

Christiansē’s sensitive and considerate use of historical fact is an example of the tragedy mode of historical emplotment, delineated by Hayden White (*Metahistory*). Sila is the core agent of the tragic, as she perceives her surroundings simultaneously as the obstacle between her and her earthly purpose, and as the means to realising it. In Sila’s case, this purpose is specifically her role as mother, and the curse that motherhood is transformed into by slavery. In her position as the vehicle of the narrative from this aspect, Sila’s voice throughout the novel weaves through the historical data represented in the text. Interestingly, as she does so, her voice – which was born of the silences already existing in the archive – comes to eclipse the archival voice, as the strategic silences and omissions incorporated into Sila’s narrative by Christiansē serve to engage with historical truths, and communicate both the story of the slave woman and her subjective thoughts, bridging the plot and the historical facts. What *Unconfessed* does, is to listen to the

silences in the archive, as opposed to attempting to fill them.

Finally, it has not been my objective to circumscribe meaning by deriving conclusive answers to the problematic issues identified and discussed in this thesis. Instead, what I have hoped to achieve is an exploration into the different forms of representation of slave subjectivity in these two texts, and an analysis of their respective functions. Given the increase in the volume of writings on Cape Colonial slavocracy and the reclamation of slave histories as constituents of the South African past, the existence of slaves has become ever more comprehensively documented. However, this documentation is deficient in that it is limited to reporting solely on the nature of the slaves' historical existence. *The Slave Book* and *Unconfessed* are two texts that exemplify more than this, and amplify the living, human reality of the slaves at the Cape. As works of historical fiction, they undertake a representation of slave subjectivity and imagined explorations into the *people* that these historical figures epitomise.

In the representation of slave subjectivity, history, historiography and the archive there are essential components of the discursive record, and thus it is imperative that they are dealt with. It has accordingly been my intention through my analysis of *The Slave Book* and *Unconfessed* to compare the extent to which these two novels engage with such records and their consideration of the discursive tradition. While the nature of slaves' existence has been documented, it is rare for their own voices to be captured. Jacobs's constant "glimpse" to the historical information presented in *The Slave Book*, to an imagining of the historical subjectivity, is one such attempt at engaging this convention. However, I find that these "glimpses" frequently tend to "reveal too much" and perhaps attempt to "fill in the gaps". Alternatively, I find that in the act of "looking sideways", in reading the silences in the archive, and representing them as such in *Unconfessed*, Christiansē's novel is able to engage more beneficially with the complexities of representing slave subjectivity. The novel's significance lies in this sensitive engagement with the historical traces of slave voices through its use of articulate silences. It offers, perhaps, a more benevolent mode of representation because the silences in *Unconfessed* speak. They speak of oppression and subordination. They speak of a trace of an individual that haunts the archive, encapsulated in discursive silences. There is purpose in the silences: they utter a lamentation for the echoes of slaves traced in history, the voices of whom can never be recovered, and the loss that this silencing has produced. Fictional reproductions of slave subjectivity take cognisance of these silences, and certainly interact with them, but more pertinently, are capable of appreciating the reasons for their existence.

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